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# Poverty Knowledge and Development Actors

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Poverty Knowledge and Development Actors

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BEJOY K. THOMAS (1977) is currently Fellow at Ashoka Trust for Research in Ecology and the Environment (ATREE), Bangalore, India. A Social Scientist with cross-disciplinary research interests in Development, Bejoy holds a Master degree in Business Economics from Department of Applied Economics, Cochin University of Science and Technology (CUSAT), India (2001). He conducted doctoral research in Development Studies at Development Research Institute (IVO), Tilburg University, The Netherlands during 2003-07. Prior to joining ATREE, he was Research Associate at IT for Change (ITfC), Bangalore, India.

How do actors who make the policies (the government, NGOs) and actors who are affected by the policies (lay and poor people) view poverty? What are the similarities/differences and the implications? How do these actors respond to poverty? This PhD dissertation, *Poverty Knowledge and Development Actors*, attempts to answer these questions based on field research undertaken in Kuttanad region in Kerala state in India. Working within the theoretical frame of participation, three empirical case studies are presented which form the core of the dissertation. In the true cross-disciplinary spirit that is characteristic of 'new' Development Studies, the study aims to maximize returns from combining disciplines (economics and social anthropology) and methods (quantitative, qualitative and participatory) and to create synergies between research and policy.

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# **Poverty Knowledge and Development Actors**

**A case study of the approach and the responses of  
the government, an NGO and the local people  
to poverty from Kerala, India**

**BEJOY K. THOMAS**



**Poverty Knowledge and Development Actors –  
A case study of the approach and the responses of  
the government, an NGO and the local people  
to poverty from Kerala, India**

**PROEFSCHRIFT**

ter verkrijging van de graad van doctor aan de  
Universiteit van Tilburg, op gezag van de rector  
magnificus, prof.dr. Ph. Eijlander, in het openbaar te  
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door

**Bejoy Kunnumpurathu Thomas,**

geboren op 1 oktober 1977 te Changanacherry, India.

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*Copromotor:* dr. Roldan Muradian

*Promotiecommissie:* prof. dr. Bas de Gaay Fortman

prof. dr. Isa Baud

dr. Luuk van Kempen

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*I will give you a talisman. Whenever you are in doubt, or when the self becomes too much with you, apply the following test. Recall the face of the poorest and the weakest man [woman] whom you may have seen, and ask yourself, if the step you contemplate is going to be of any use to him [her]. Will he [she] gain anything by it? Will it restore him [her] to a control over his [her] own life and destiny? In other words, will it lead to swaraj [freedom] for the hungry and spiritually starving millions? Then you will find your doubts and your self melt away'*

Mahatma Gandhi<sup>1</sup>

Such simple is the solution to poverty. Yet, the 'self' (*aham*) dominates in most of us. My 'self' survived a PhD, but will this do any good for the poor? If this study takes knowledge of poverty or practice towards its alleviation a little further, I am contented.

This is the time to remember and express my gratitude to all those who have played their role in me getting this far.

The preparations for the PhD began in 2002 when I joined a research project on NGOs organized jointly by Development Research Institute (IVO) and Department of Applied Economics, Cochin University of Science and Technology (CUSAT), India, from where I finished my Master degree. Gerard de Groot was confident then in bringing me into the team. A very democratic leader, I thank him for the freedom that he allowed at work. Though I changed completely the methodological approach that was originally envisaged, after joining IVO in 2003, I hope I have finally done some justice to his faith in me.

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Throughout the PhD research I closely worked with my co-supervisor Roldan Muradian. Though I gave him my share of headache by being argumentative and, in his words, 'disperse' at times, he was patient to listen and put me back on track. This thesis is his as much as it is mine.

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---

<sup>1</sup> Mahatma Gandhi, Last Phase, Vol. II (1958) p. 65, quoted at <http://www.mkgandhi.org/gquotes1.htm> . Accessed on 10.01.2006.

At IVO, I remember Jenniffer Weusten for her kindness. Thanks to Maria José for coordinating the crucial final logistics of the project. Ruud Picavet, supervisor of the research paper that I wrote in the spring of 2000 as a TSP student from Cochin University, expressed keen interest in the progress of my PhD as well. Wim Pelulessy also gave critical observations on my research. Arthur Giesberts patiently answered my many queries on computers. I remember Job de Haan, Tinka Ewoldt, Bertha Vallejo and Monica Twumasi as well. Corry Stuyts of Tilburg University library promptly responded to my requests for assistance.

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I am still a seeker and experimenter of Truth, thanks to V. Mathew Kurian, my first professor in Social Sciences.

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This thesis, with all its errors and limitations, was built on the premise that plenty and penury isn't all about money. At the end of the PhD journey, I am even more convinced of this. In the same spirit, I dedicate this humble work to the many people whom I have met during these years, though not always had enough in their wallets, were rich in their hearts!

Bangalore, India  
April 20, 2009

Bejoy K. Thomas



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## **Major Abbreviations**

BPL	Below Poverty Line
GoI	Government of India
GoK	Government of Kerala
HDI	Human Development Index
HDR	Human Development Report
I/C	Income/Consumption
LSMS	Living Standards Measurement Studies
MDGs	Millennium Development Goals
NGO	Non Governmental Organization
NHG	Neighbourhood Group
NSSO	National Sample Survey Organization
PLA	Participatory Learning and Action
PPA	Participatory Poverty Assessment
PRA	Participatory Rural Appraisal
RRA	Rapid Rural Appraisal
SHG	Self Help Group
SPEM	State Poverty Eradication Mission
UNDP	United Nations Development Programme
WDR	World Development Report

## **INTRODUCTION**



# I

## INTRODUCTION

### 1.1 Introduction

The recent past has witnessed heightened interest in global poverty and concerted efforts aimed at its reduction. Whereas the nations of the world, under the umbrella of the United Nations, have pledged to work towards the realization of the Millennium Development Goals (MDGs)<sup>2</sup>, the international civil society is united in the Global Call to Action Against Poverty (GCAP)<sup>3</sup>. However, the fervour apart, a number conceptual and methodological issues stand in the way of assessing progress in poverty reduction. For example, how do actors who make the policies (the government, NGOs) and actors who are affected by the policies (lay people, the poor) view poverty? What are the similarities/differences and the implications? How do these actors respond to ill-being? We seek answers to questions such as these in this PhD dissertation. This chapter introduces the study.

The next section, 1.2, describes the research problem. Section 1.3 delimits the study and specifies the research questions. Section 1.4 summarizes the operationalisation of the research. The final section, 1.5, outlines the structure of the dissertation.

### 1.2 The Research Problem

Responses to poverty depend on the understanding of it. Even while the ‘dollar-a-day’ measure remains popular among the various international organisations<sup>4</sup> as the yardstick of poverty reduction, there has emerged an apparent consensus on the multidimensional nature of poverty (Baulch, 1996; World Bank, 2000<sup>5</sup>). Moreover, recent studies have also brought forth the diversity in the understanding of poverty at the local level (Krishna, 2004; 2006) as well as among the various development actors, viz., the government, non-governmental organisations (NGOs), the elite and the poor (McGee, 1999; de Swaan et al, 2000; Narayan et al, 2000; Hossain, 2005).

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<sup>2</sup> See, <http://www.un.org/millenniumgoals/> (Accessed on 02.04.2007)

<sup>3</sup> See, <http://www.whiteband.org/> (Accessed on 02.04.2007)

<sup>4</sup> Goal one of the MDGs, for instance.

<sup>5</sup> See, <http://www.undp-povertycentre.org/md%2Dpoverty/> (Accessed on 02.04.2007), for the details of a recent UNDP conference (2005) on the theme.

Differences/similarities in the understandings of poverty among the actors is an issue of great significance. Lack of agreement between the 'bottom' (beneficiary level, the poor) and the 'top' (policy making level, the Government or NGO) on who are the poor and why are they so can have undesirable economic, social and political consequences (E.g. wastage of resources, mis-targeting, social divide). While the approaches to identify the poor and tackle the causes of poverty at the 'top' are largely 'visible' (E.g. policy documents, public statements), those at the 'bottom' are not quite so. A study of the dimensions of poverty at the local level, therefore, assumes relevance.

Poverty, nevertheless, is not entirely a 'local' product. There are linkages between global, national/sub-national, regional/local and household/individual levels. Hence, the 'macro' and the 'meso' contexts need also be taken into account, in addition to the 'micro' while examining poverty. Furthermore, the multidimensional nature of poverty necessitates a cross-disciplinary approach to its study (Harriss, 2002; Hulme and Toye, 2006). Multidimensionality and cross-disciplinarity, in turn, implies the use of mixed methods (White, 2002; Kanbur 2003). This is the general premise on which this study has been built.

### **1.3 Scope of the Study and Key Questions**

This dissertation falls under the disciplinary purview of Development Studies<sup>6</sup>. Our basic objective is to examine the understandings of development actors on poverty and their responses to it. We take three actors, viz., the government, the non-governmental sector and the local people that operate, although not exclusively, at three different levels. The governments operate mostly at the macro level. E.g. formulation of national or state-level policies for poverty alleviation. The NGO activities are centred mostly at the meso level. E.g. income-generation initiatives among women in a locality or region. The domain of the local people is confined to the micro level. E.g. their household and workplace. There exists linkages between the different levels and only a multi-level approach can generate a comprehensive perspective on the approaches and responses to poverty. However, this study will not probe more into these inter-linkages and associated dynamics, but restrict itself to understandings on (government/NGO policies, local

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<sup>6</sup> Development Studies, as distinguished from Development Economics or Development Sociology, originated as a critique of the dominant views on Development that were in vogue during the 1950s through the 1970s. Over the years the discipline has transformed itself into an applied, cross-disciplinary approach to the study of Development, avoiding the limitations of excessive specialisation, maximising the returns from combining disciplines/methodologies and providing the best link between research and policy. Desai and Potter (2002) and Clark (2006) try to bring together a broad spectrum of views on Development Studies in one volume. Harriss (2002), Kanbur (2002), Sumner and Tribe (2004), Hulme and Toye (2006) and Woolcock (2007) offer recent views on the discipline.

voices) and responses to (government/NGO programmes, coping strategies of the local people/poor) poverty.

The central research question is;

What are the understandings of the government, a NGO and the local people in a rural area on poverty and what are their responses to it?

The key questions that we will address are;

- (1) What are the macro (national/sub-national) and meso (regional/local) contexts of poverty?
- (2) How does the government view poverty? What are its responses to poverty?
- (3) What is the NGO view on poverty? What are its meso and micro level interventions?
- (4) How do local people in a rural area view poverty? What are the locally relevant dimensions of poverty?
- (5) What is the current socio-economic situation at the micro (household) level? How do households respond to stresses and shocks and cope with them?

#### 1.4 Operationalisation

The empirical material used in this study emerges from field research conducted in Kuttanad region of the Southwestern state of Kerala in India. The ‘development actors’ in our Kerala case include the national and state governments, a local NGO and lay people in a village in Kuttanad. Table 1.1 illustrates how the research questions were operationalised.

*Table 1.1 Operationalisation of the Research*

Level	Operational Research Questions	Methods
Macro	1. What is the national/sub-national (India/Kerala) context of poverty? ( <i>Research question 1</i> )	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Desk research of academic and popular literature and statistics</li> </ul>
	2. How does the India/Kerala government view poverty? ( <i>Research question 2</i> )	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Desk research of published government policy documents and academic and popular literature</li> </ul>
	3. What are the responses of the government to poverty? ( <i>Research question 2</i> )	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Desk research of documents and literature on governmental poverty alleviation programmes</li> </ul>

<i>Meso</i>	4. What is the regional/local (Kuttanad/study village) context of poverty? ( <i>Research question 1</i> )	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Desk research of academic and popular literature and statistics on Kuttanad</li> <li>• Field research through observation, group discussions and individual interviews with local people</li> </ul>
	5. What is the NGO view on poverty? ( <i>Research question 3</i> )	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Desk research of NGO documents and coverage by popular media</li> <li>• Field research through interviews with NGO personnel and observation</li> </ul>
	6. What are the activities of the NGO in Kuttanad and the study village? ( <i>Research question 3</i> )	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Desk research of NGO documents</li> <li>• Field research through interviews with NGO personnel, clients and non-clients, participation in group meetings and observation</li> </ul>
	7. How do local people in the study village view poverty? ( <i>Research question 4</i> )	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Field research through group discussions and individual interviews with local people</li> </ul>
	8. What are the locally relevant dimensions of poverty? ( <i>Research question 4</i> )	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Field research for operational research questions 4 and 7 and desk synthesis</li> </ul>
<i>Micro</i>	9. What is the current socio-economic situation of the households in Kuttanad and the study village? ( <i>Research question 5</i> )	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Field research through semi-structured interviewing of a sample of households in the study village (2004-05) and observation</li> </ul>
	10. What stresses/shocks do the households in the study village face and how do they cope? ( <i>Research question 5</i> )	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Field research through semi-structured interviewing of a sample of households in the study village (2004-05)</li> </ul>
	11. What is the role of the NGO among households in the study village? ( <i>Research question 3</i> )	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Field research through semi-structured interviewing of a sample of households in the study village (2004-05), interviews with NGO personnel, clients and non-clients, participation in group meetings and observation</li> </ul>



## 1.5 Structure of the Thesis

This dissertation has six chapters organized into two parts, in addition to introduction (Chapter 1) and conclusion (Chapter 8). Part I locates the research within the current conceptual and methodological debate on poverty. It comprises of two chapters.

*Chapter 2* provides a selective review of the methodological debate on poverty. The chapter narrates the story behind the buzzwords in the current vocabulary of poverty studies ('multidimensional', 'cross-disciplinary') and notes that compared with the divisive views of the past (qualitative v/s quantitative), integrative thinking ('qual-quant', 'participatory numbers') has recently come to characterise poverty research methods. *Chapter 3* introduces the conceptual and methodological themes underlying this study and sets the context from which to approach the empirical chapters. We advance participatory approach as the theoretical crux of the study and examine it in relation to poverty knowledge, development actors and policy.

Part II presents the specific results of field research in Kuttanad. It comprises of four chapters.

*Chapter 4* provides acquaintance with the research setting (Kuttanad) and describes the fieldwork.

*Chapter 5* is the core of the study. Part A of the chapter reviews briefly the approach and the responses of the Government of India (GoI) and the Government of Kerala (GoK) to poverty. Part B compares and contrasts the view on poverty of the lay people with that of the policymakers, taking the real-life issue of identification of the Below Poverty Line (BPL) households. Drawing from fieldwork and applying the 'participatory numbers' approach, we devise a 'local method' to identify poor households, based on the villagers' poverty criteria. The local method is then compared with the official methods used by GoI and GoK. Based on the results, we argue for the need to take into account local dimensions of poverty, in addition to objective/universal dimensions, in the design of poverty reduction programmes. Our findings also suggest that effective risk mitigation strategies must be devised to help poor households cope with shocks and stresses as well as prevent the vulnerable non-poor from falling into poverty.

*Chapter 6* examines household responses to shocks and stresses and points out when, how and to what extent do household resources (economic, human and social capital) and institutional intervention (government and NGO) help households cope. In the backdrop of the popularisation of social capital, it has become fashionable in development circles to highlight the resilience of the poor in the midst of stresses and shocks as well as their resourcefulness. Expressing scepticism, we argue that social capital is a ‘conditional’ resource for the poor, availability of which is dependant on the presence of a ‘critical mass’ of other resources. The State plays a pivotal role in creating this ‘critical mass’. Household level case studies from fieldwork, on how the poor cope with vulnerable situations, are used to illustrate this point.

*Chapter 7* provides a contrasting narrative of the approach and the responses of a local NGO and the State to development/poverty in Kuttanad. We find that while the State takes a largely ‘growth’ centric approach to regional development, the NGO in the case study is guided by a local-oriented, ‘sustainability’ model. The key analytical contribution of the chapter, however, lies in explaining the dynamics of NGO-State relations. We argue that NGOs exhibit multiple identities – selective collaboration, gap-filling and posing alternatives – in the process of engagement with the State. Reading this alongside recent empirical evidence, we suggest that the relationship between the two needs to be conceptualized as more complex, and not confrontationist as often posited. Such conceptualization will help understand the limitations as also the possibilities of NGOs and the State in different development contexts, which in turn can inform policies.

*Table 1.2 Structure of the Thesis*

Chapter	Operational Research Questions										
	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10	11
IV											
V											
VI											
VII											

The working method of this dissertation was to come up with at least three ‘stand-alone’ empirical articles publishable in peer-reviewed journals, which could at the same time also be put together to form a coherent book. Portions of chapters 2, 3 and 4 form part of a review essay published in *Development in Practice*. Originally written as three separate empirical case studies/articles, chapters 5 (part B), 6 and 7, each have its own review and methodology enabling readers to go through them fairly independently. The article based on Chapter 5 (Part B) is in press with *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities* and the article based on Chapter 6 is forthcoming in *Journal of Asian and African Studies*. The third empirical article, based on Chapter 7, is under review.

Table 1.2 illustrates how the chapters are related to the operational research questions.



**PART I**

**CONCEPTUAL THEMES**



## II

### THE POVERTY DEBATE<sup>7</sup>

#### 2.1 Introduction

*'And so these men of Indostan  
Disputed loud and long,  
Each in his own opinion  
Exceeding stiff and strong,  
Though each was partly in the right,  
And all were in the wrong!'*<sup>8</sup>

The objective of this chapter is to provide a brief and selective historical overview of 'the poverty debate'. We acknowledge the existence of a number of exhaustive accounts on the evolution of Development/poverty, from a variety of viewpoints<sup>9</sup>. Taking care not to be repetitive on the one hand and on the other, intending to provide the background for the theoretical issues that are echoed in this dissertation, we restrict our review to the methodological aspects of the debate. Specifically, our aim is to narrate the story behind the buzzwords in the current vocabulary of poverty studies, viz., 'multidimensional' and 'cross-disciplinary' and examine how approaching poverty moved away over the time from divisive dichotomies to integrative thinking, from qualitative v/s quantitative to 'qual-quant' and from economics v/s anthropology to 'participatory econometrics'/'participatory numbers'.

Section 2.2 outlines the origins of the poverty debate. Section 2.3 introduces the 'pure economic approach' to poverty that was in dominance during the first decades of Development, and its critique. We will examine the critique both from outside economics as also from within it. Section 2.4 discusses the implications and recent trends. Section 2.5 concludes.

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<sup>7</sup> This chapter as well as portions of chapters 3 (section 3.3.2) and 4 (section 4.3.1) form part of a review essay, Thomas, B.K (2008) 'Methodological Debate in Poverty Studies: Towards 'Participatory Qual-quant'?', *Development in Practice*, 18(2): 280-8.

<sup>8</sup> Quoted from the popular old parable of the six blind men and the elephant.

<sup>9</sup> For example, Kanbur and Squire, 2000 (Economics), Edelman and Haugerud, 2005: 1-74 (Anthropology), Sachs, 1992 (Critical Social Sciences), Chant, 2003 (Feminist Research), Meier and Siglitz, 2000 (The World Bank) and Weiss et al, 2005: 143-311 (The United Nations).

## 2.2 Origins of The Poverty Debate

An overwhelming portion of the literature on poverty tends to focus on the less developed countries (LDCs) of the world. This is not to say that poverty does not exist in the developed countries (DCs). Nevertheless, for academic and policy purposes, poverty is treated primarily as a problem of the LDCs.

Though the antecedents of the scientific debate on poverty could be traced back to the late 1800s (Rowntree, 1910[1980]), it was in the 1950s that such nomenclatures as LDCs and DCs first appeared. A host of new nation states, freed from colonialism, emerged in the aftermath of the World War II. Many of them were economically poor. The new geopolitics resulted in the creation of a division between the Capitalist and Communist blocs. Apart from them were a large number of countries, some new and some old, but very diverse, spreading through the continents of Asia, Africa and South-Central America, yet collectively brought together under the banner of the Third World. A common problem, economic underdevelopment and poverty, bounded them together and the term LDCs was used to refer to them. The problem called for solutions and a new discipline, development economics, emerged to propose them, along with its own experts. The different accounts on the origin of 'the poverty debate' agree, more or less, up to this point. They also agree that development economics in the 1950s was traditional economics, at that time largely Keynesian, applied to the Third World (Peet with Hartwick, 1999: 37-47, Waelbroeck, 1998). However, they differ with regard to the processes that went behind this. Accordingly, there are two major viewpoints on the beginnings of the debate, the *Mainstream Perspective* and the *Critical Perspective*.

The *Mainstream Perspective* sees the shift in attention to Development as 'natural'. Removing economic backwardness was the route to the development of the Third World. As the lead discipline to study economic issues, it was only natural that economics was entrusted with the new task. Meier (2000: 13) observes in this context,

'After World War II the subject of development was thrust upon economists as newly independent governments in emerging countries sought advice for the acceleration of their development. Political independence could be obtained from Whitehall, but for economic independence the new governments of Asia and Africa turned to economists in the United Kingdom and America. As a discipline...development economics had to be rediscovered or newly founded'.



The *Critical Perspective*, in contrast, sees the origins of Development and the new interest in poverty as 'intentional'. The key to this view is that Development represents a new form of subjugation.

'...these development planners know what "the people" in the "developing countries" want...what they want is what "we" have..."they" are not yet advanced enough to be able to fully indulge themselves without repercussions...' (Bird 1984, cited in Escobar, 1995: 159).

Thus, Development and the rhetoric of poverty alleviation/reduction replaced colonialism. Poverty, according to the critical school, is a modern construct defined using the economic yardstick of income by the nations that emerged powerful after World War II, classifying themselves as rich and the rest of the world as poor (Rahnema, 1992a).

In this dissertation, we take a position of reformation within the mainstream, as reflected in participation. Even as we agree, in spirit, with some points raised by the critical school (Post Development/Post Colonialism), we have reservations on its call to abandon Development altogether. Post Development/Post Colonial alternatives appear to be nihilistic (Diawara, 2000) and too abstract devoid of much applicability (Corbridge, 1998, Pieterse, 2000). Furthermore, many of its proponents, though Third Worlders by birth (E.g. Escobar, Spivak), built up their careers in the West and live the very urbanized affluent life that they criticize. In contrast, participation, as we shall see later, provided applicable alternatives intervening directly in the lives of the poor and the people at the grassroots. Moreover, its proponents (E.g. Chambers) are usually practitioners as well, living and working amongst the poor, exemplifying personal and professional change (Chambers, 1997, 2004). We, nevertheless, highlight critical voices, other than and against participation as well, wherever relevant in this dissertation.

### **2.3 The Pure Economic Approach and its Critique**

In the first decades of Development (1950s and 60s), it appears as though there was no direct focus on poverty. It would be wrong though, to say that the early development economists did not pay attention to distribution and poverty at all. Lewis, for instance, discussed functional distribution of income, though not size distribution (inequality). He also seemed to have an idea of the basic headcount index of poverty (Fields, 2004). However, the prime concern was on growth. The argument was that (economic) growth would automatically reduce poverty. From a methodological perspective, this was an expected outcome given the dominance of economics in development theory and

practice (Escobar, 1995: 63-89) and the wariness of other disciplines like Anthropology in getting involved in Development (Hoben, 1982). The emphasis on growth was evident in the adoption of models à la Harrod-Domar in many of the newly independent poor countries. The Indian five-year plans during the 1950s used, for instance, the Harrod-Domar model and a variant of it by Mahalanobis (Waelbroeck, 1998, Meier, 2000).

The initial confidence in the ‘trickle down’ effect of growth, however, started fading in the 1970s and poverty and inequality began to move to the top of the international development agenda. Distributive concerns were highlighted in ‘redistribution with growth’ and poverty was addressed head-on through the ‘basic needs’ approach (Weiss et al, 2005: 239-45, Stewart, 2006). The concept of poverty that guided these strategies had its roots in Rowntree’s study. Rowntree defined poverty as a situation where the total earnings of a family are ‘...insufficient to obtain the minimum necessities for the maintenance of merely physical efficiency.’ (Rowntree, 1910[1980]). Poverty was thus defined in terms of income/consumption. The highly influential calorific norm of poverty proposed by Dandekar and Rath in the early 1970s in India followed this definition (GoI, 1993).

The income/consumption definition of poverty logically followed the ‘pure economic approach’ to development. Theoretically, it fitted well with the utility maximization objective of microeconomics. At an applied level, poverty could be measured by total consumption, proxied by income or expenditure data, a minimum of which will determine the poverty line (Ruggeri Laderchi et al, 2003). However, the limitations of this narrow concept of poverty and the too quantitatively bend methodology led to critique and refinement both from outside economics as well as from inside, towards the end of the 1970s. We could broadly identify two sources of conceptual/methodological critique from outside economics. The first source was the grassroots activists and radicals of the Third World. We may call this *The Participatory Critique*. The second was other Social Sciences. We may call this *The Anthropological Critique*, as it was led by and often associated with Anthropology.

### 2.3.1 *The Participatory Critique*

Participation as a tool in development theory and practice could be traced back to the colonial period (Hickey and Mohan, 2005). However, participation as a bottom-up alternative to the then prevailing top-down approach to development emerged in the late 1970s. The intellectual roots of the approach are attributed to critical thinking of the likes of Paulo Freire who put forward the ‘pedagogy of the oppressed’ in Latin America, resulting in Participatory Action Research (PAR). In mainstream development, the

approach gained popularity during the 1980s, owing greatly to the work of Robert Chambers who made a scathing criticism of the ‘rural development tourism’ of urban-based, powerful experts and exposed the weaknesses of the conventional questionnaire based methodologies (Chambers, 1983). The critique transformed into concrete operationalisable tools and methodologies, initially in the form of *Rapid Rural Appraisal* (RRA) and then as *Participatory Rural Appraisal* (PRA). The emphasis of the new approach was on active engagement of the experts (scientists, development professionals) with the lay people (farmers, poor villagers), involving a shift of power from the former to the latter. RRA was used mainly by academics and universities for ‘extractive’ research. It evolved later into PRA, being used mainly by NGOs. PRA acknowledged the analytical capabilities of the lay people aiming at their ‘empowerment’ (Chambers, 1994a, 1994b, 1994c, 1995). A distinction was thus made between the traditional ‘extractive’ research and the new ‘empowering’ research. The evolution of participation had many phases – RRA to PRA and to Participatory Learning and Action (PLA)<sup>10</sup>. In recent times, Participatory Poverty Assessments (PPA) have come to represent the ‘mainstreaming’ and ‘institutionalization’ of PRA by the World Bank (Narayan et al, 2000; Norton, 2001; Robb, 2002).

Forming the theoretical crux of this study, participation is dealt with in greater detail later in Chapter 3.

### 2.3.2 *The Anthropological Critique*

Anthropology has traditionally been the study of the development of man. During the colonial period, anthropologists studied the ‘natives’. Though there were exceptions (Malinowski, 1929), the discipline had little to say on ‘social’ issues or ‘development’. Exclusive focus on the study of ‘natives’, as scientists, and excessive preoccupation with colonial governments, as professionals, left anthropologists and their discipline in crisis in the aftermath of colonialism (Lewis, 1973). The discipline had to redefine its role in the post World War II scenario. Anthropologists with their intimate knowledge of the ‘local’, especially of the developing world, could play an important role in Development. However, anthropologists were rather cautious in venturing into a new terrain. The failure of economic approaches and the rise of participation in the late 1970s and the early 1980s provided opportunity for the discipline to relocate itself (Hoben, 1982). The 1970s saw the rise of Development Anthropology (Cochrane, 1980, Escobar, 1991).

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<sup>10</sup> PLA is an umbrella term for a wide range of similar approaches and methodologies, including PRA, RRA, PAR, Participatory Learning Methods (PALM) and many others, a common theme to all these approaches being the full participation of people in the processes of learning about their needs and opportunities, and in the action required to address them. See [http://www.iied.org/NR/agbioliv/pla\\_notes/whatispla.html](http://www.iied.org/NR/agbioliv/pla_notes/whatispla.html) (Accessed on 09.04.2007).

Anthropological investigation during the 1980s exposed the gaps between concepts, models and reality (Hill, 1986). Anthropological critique of the traditional economic household models is a classic example (Folbre, 1986; Roberts, 1991, Fratkin and Johnson, 1990). Applied Anthropology formed an integral part of the Participatory Approach (Chambers 1994a, Mair, 1985). The new generation non-Euro-American Anthropologists posed critique not just of the economistic approach, but the foundations of Development itself (Escobar, 1988).

Besides providing critical insights based on field evidence, anthropology offered methodological alternatives. Participant observation, the methodological core of ethnography, generates large qualitative information and contextual quantitative data. Primacy is placed on the concepts and perceptions of the people. There is a distinction between the 'Emic' (insider/local culture) and 'Etic' (outsider/researcher) perspectives. The implication is that data/information from the 'local' forms the 'model', rather than a 'model' fitting data into its framework (as in traditional economics). Summing up,

'Anthropology's ethnographically grounded methodology, which emphasizes local and subjective realities and acknowledges the micro-political effects of large events, including within the household, presents insights into how development actually works, which policy-makers could not and should not ignore' (Grillo, 2002).

### *2.3.3 The Critique from Within Economics*

The 1980s witnessed critical introspection among economists regarding the applicability of conventional theories and methods. In the mainstream, while McCloskey (1983) exposed the shaky scientific foundations of economics, Leamer provided a sarcastic critique of econometrics (1983). On the other hand, the impasse in development economics was evident in the attack by Lal (1983 [1997]) on the alleged '*dirigiste* dogma'.

Field studies by economists revealed non-monetary and local dimensions of poverty as well as problems that existed in economic methodology. Poverty studies rooted in tradition could not capture the complexities of rural life, multiple dimensions of the poverty and the significance of the 'local' element. Research by Jodha in Rajasthan in India, which was published as what was then 'a minority view' on poverty (Jodha, 1988)<sup>11</sup>, was particularly noteworthy. During his fieldwork in rural Rajasthan during 1963-'66 and 1982-'84 Jodha observed that households were better-off in local indicators of well-being even while they had become poorer in traditional 'economic' (money-

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<sup>11</sup> Jodha (1988) has been cited extensively ever since. So overwhelming was the interest in the paper that it was still being debated years after publication (Jodha, 1999; Moore et al, 1998).

metric) terms. The experience exposed several ‘gaps’ that existed in the methodology that failed to capture much qualitative and even quantitative information (Jodha, 1989). At a conceptual level, the construction and reproduction of knowledge in Political Economy was criticized as being based on the empiricist epistemology of Neo-Classical Economics, which made poverty ‘virtually invisible’ (Tooze and Murphy, 1996).

The prevailing sentiment was summed up by Wilber (1986) in the following words while introducing a collection of methodological papers in development economics:

‘The growth of methodological debate is often cited as evidence of a science in crisis. If so, Economics clearly is in trouble’.

While there was a felt need for improving the methodology, some critics wanted Economists to start a dialogue with other Social Scientists like Anthropologists (Bardhan, 1989) while others opposed it (Kannappan, 1995: 864)<sup>12</sup>.

## **2.4 Implications and Recent Trends**

The critique resulted in *conceptual broadening*, from unidimensional to multidimensional (Baulch, 1996; World Bank, 2000), *methodological refinement*, from qualitative v/s quantitative to ‘qual-quant’ (Kanbur, 2003; White, 2002) and *cross-disciplinarity*, from economics v/s anthropology to ‘participatory econometrics’/‘participatory numbers’ (Hulme and Toye, 2006; Rao, 2002; Mayoux and Chambers, 2005).

### *2.4.1 Conceptual Broadening*

Early attempts at broadening the concept of poverty could be traced back to Sen’s (1985) idea of ‘capabilities’ and ‘functionings’. It found operationalisability, although in a restricted sense, in the Human Development Reports (HDRs) of the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP). Baulch’s ‘Poverty Pyramid’ (Baulch, 1996) reflects the evolution of thinking about poverty from a uni-dimensional concept (focusing narrowly on just personal consumption) to a multi-dimensional one (dealing broadly with common property resources, state provided commodities, assets, dignity and autonomy in addition to consumption).

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<sup>12</sup> See, Fullbrook, 2005, for a recent collection of essays that critically examine the problems in the theories and the methods of mainstream Economics and suggest solutions.

The change in the approach of World Development Report (WDR) 2000 from WDR 1990 indicates the influence of conceptual broadening on policy. WDR 1990 had focused primarily on the dollar-a-day criterion of poverty, which is based on the Income/Consumption approach. The approach also forms the background of questionnaire-based household surveys such as Living Standards Measurement Studies (LSMS) of the World Bank. However, the multi-dimensional concept of poverty was given policy recognition at the international level through WDR 2000. The Report proposed policy action to tackle poverty by 'promoting opportunity', 'facilitating empowerment' and 'enhancing security' (World Bank, 2000).

More recent developments have tended to conceptualize poverty in terms of exclusion (Atkinson, 1998) and human rights violation (de Gaay Fortman, 2003). Shaffer (2001) observes, in this context, that there has been a shift from a 'physiological model of deprivation', focused on the non-fulfillment of basic material or biological needs to a 'social model of deprivation', emphasizing such elements as lack of autonomy, powerlessness, lack of self-respect/dignity, etc. Attention has shifted from the 'static' to the 'dynamic' nature of poverty. Concepts like 'chronic poverty' (Hulme and Shepherd, 2003) have emerged in this context. The current concern is to examine mobility; falling into and escaping from poverty (Krishna, 2004).

#### *2.4.2 Methodological Refinement*

The 'qualitative-quantitative' debate has strong implications for research on poverty. The methodological crisis of the 1980s and ensuing developments culminating in the broadened conceptualization of poverty has revived the debate in the recent past. The call for integration of the two approaches has once again become prominent in the agenda<sup>13</sup>. The enormous interest in this direction has resulted in organization of conferences at Cornell in 2001 (Kanbur, 2003), Swansea in 2002<sup>14</sup> and Toronto in 2004<sup>15</sup> and much scholastic output since 2000.

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<sup>13</sup> We will take up relevant strands in the efforts at methodological refinement at various points in this dissertation.

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.swan.ac.uk/cds/research/SDRC-conferenceabstracts.htm> (Accessed on 03.07.2006).

<sup>15</sup> <http://www.utoronto.ca/mcis/q2/> (Accessed on 03.07.2006).

Post-WDR 2000 period witnessed significant developments in methodological experiments. In-depth life histories are being used to supplement panel data. ‘Thinking small’ (Hulme, 2004) has gained acceptance in the mainstream. A methodological innovation in deriving ‘local’ definitions of poverty and examining household mobility is the ‘Stages-of-Progress’ Approach (Krishna, 2004). Initial results and appraisal of ‘Qual-Quant’ from the field, as reflected in the 2004 Toronto conference (Kanbur and Shaffer, 2007), have been positive. Participatory methods have come to be accepted as a *third way* development research, making the traditional *dichotomous* division of research methods into Qualitative and Quantitative almost irrelevant (Mayoux and Chambers, 2005). The latest graduate textbooks on research methods for development are indicative of this change (Mikkelsen, 2005; Mayoux in Desai and Potter, 2006: 115; Thomas, 2007).

#### 2.4.3 Cross-disciplinarity

The limitations of mono-disciplinary approaches in understanding the complexities of development having become evident, heterodox approaches and inter-disciplinary interactions assumed significance.

A remarkable development was the initiation of ‘conversations’ between economists and anthropologists. Positioned at methodological opposites, the first effort at dialogue coincided with the methodological crisis in economics in the 1980s (Bardhan, 1989; Lipton, 1992). A recent addition has been the conference on ‘Culture and Public Action’ organized by The World Bank where Amartya Sen and Arjun Appadurai, the two key figures in economics and anthropology respectively, led the discussion (Rao and Walton, 2004)<sup>16</sup>.

Cross-disciplinarity has become the new way to tackle the issues of well-being and poverty (Hulme and Toye, 2006). Attempting to define cross-disciplinarity, Kanbur (2002) has tried to distinguish it from the multidisciplinary and interdisciplinary approaches of the past. Whereas ‘multidisciplinarity’ implies letting each discipline do its best with its own methodologies to arrive at a final analytical synthesis, ‘interdisciplinarity’ attempts at deep integration, from the beginning, through the analysis till the final recommendations for policy. Cross-disciplinarity, however, is the ‘... generic term to mean any analysis or policy recommendation that is based substantively on the analysis and methods of more than one discipline’ (Kanbur, 2002: 483).

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<sup>16</sup> See also <http://www.q-squared.ca/papers.html> (Accessed on 03.07.2006).

Cross-disciplinarity has led to the formation of new heterodox disciplines, 'Development Studies' being the prominent among them. Although inter-disciplinary approaches to development have been in existence since the 1970s, the recent developments seem to have brought a trend to consider 'Development Studies' as a holistic discipline to study complex social reality and poverty (Harriss, 2002). Development Studies, as distinguished from development economics, originated as a critique of the dominant views on Development that were in vogue during the 1950s through the 1970s. Over the years the discipline has transformed itself into an applied, cross-disciplinary approach to the study of Development, avoiding the limitations of excessive specialization, maximizing the returns from combining disciplines/methodologies and providing the best link between research and policy (Clark, 2006, Sumner and Tribe, 2004, Hulme and Toye, 2006, Woolcock, 2007)<sup>17</sup>.

We may say that the academic discourse on poverty sounds pretty much like the old parable quoted at the outset. If poverty were the elephant, it has been a story of blind men (economists v/s social scientists, academicians v/s activists) arguing amongst each other, each trying to thrust its view on the rest. The blind men in the parable are said to have continued their debate for long. Each was right in his own way, but all were wrong too! The debate on poverty still continues. However, of late, there have been some signs of agreement or at least, a willingness to accommodate each others' viewpoint.

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<sup>17</sup> Cross-disciplinarity and interaction between Economics and Social Sciences is not without tension. There still persists 'Economics Imperialism', meaning the encroachment of Economics on the domain of Social Sciences and heterodox disciplines (Fine, 2002). Interesting enough, some economists themselves have made a claim that Economics has indeed been imperialistic and that Economics Imperialism has been successful (Lazear, 2000: 103).



### III

## POVERTY KNOWLEDGE AND DEVELOPMENT ACTORS

### 3.1 Four Approaches to Poverty

This chapter introduces the conceptual themes underlying this study and sets the context from which to approach the empirical chapters. Sections 3.2 and 3.3 take up the participatory approach and examine it in relation to poverty knowledge, development actors and policy. We will begin with a brief overview of the major approaches to poverty.

The evolution of conceptualizing poverty from a unidimensional to a multidimensional stance has brought forth different approaches located in between the far left and the far right of the narrow (unidimensional, economic) to broad (multidimensional, mixed social science) continuum. Following Ruggeri Laderchi et al (2003) we examine here the four major approaches, viz., Monetary (MA), Capability (CA), Social Exclusion (SE) and Participatory (PA). Economists pioneered MA and CA whereas SE and PA were advanced by Social Scientists.

#### *3.1.1 Monetary Approach*

Monetary or Income/Consumption Approach (I/C) is the pure economic approach to poverty (Baulch, 1996). It is based on the microeconomic objective of utility maximization. Poverty is measured using consumption/expenditure or income data. If consumption/income falls below a limit (poverty line), the unit (E.g. a household) is poor. As such, MA could be said as the narrow or pure unidimensional view of poverty. Field personnel collect numerical data using questionnaires on a representative sample of the population. The analysis is done elsewhere and conclusions are drawn on the whole population. LSMS of the World Bank and the surveys of the National Sample Survey Organization (NSSO) of India are examples. MA formed the basis of Rowntree's (1910 [1980]) pioneering scientific study on poverty and still retains considerable influence on policies (World Bank, 2000) on account of its advantages (E.g. objectivity and ease in application).

### 3.1.2 *Capability Approach*

CA, built and extended upon the conceptual foundations proposed by Amartya Sen (Sen, 1985), is rooted in Economics but attempts to do away with the weaknesses of MA. The approach acknowledges multidimensionality of poverty. It could be described as a broadened economic approach to poverty. In CA, poverty is defined as a failure to achieve basic capabilities ('capability deprivation'). In addition to monetary resources, the role of non-monetary factors in ensuring well-being is emphasized (Alkire, 2002; Saith, 2001a, Clark, 2006). However, operationalisation of the approach is difficult. The choice of indicators is the key to capturing the many dimensions of well-being. UNDP in its HDRs has tried to define poverty based on capability in terms of indicators of longevity (E.g. less than forty years of life expectancy at birth), knowledge (E.g. adult literacy) and decent standard of living (E.g. lack of access to safe water), in addition to income (Anand and Sen, 1994).

### 3.1.3 *Social Exclusion Approach*

SE, originally conceived as a tool to study ill-being in developed countries, define poverty as a state of being excluded from the normal activities relative to a particular society (Saith, 2001b; Figueroa, 2006). Exclusion could be economic (E.g. lack of social security), social (E.g. being a minority or 'low-caste') or political (E.g. absence of voting rights). Relativity, agency and dynamics have been pointed out as the three key elements in SE (Atkinson, 1998). *Relativity* refers to the specificity of place and time of exclusion. *Agency* signifies the role of agents who exclude others or who are excluded by others. Finally, *dynamics* denotes the transfer of exclusion across generations. SE is operationalised either 'top-down' or 'bottom-up'. In the former, a set of indicators of exclusion relative to a society is chosen and field data is evaluated against this. In the latter, perceptions of people themselves form the basis of developing indicators and facilitating evaluation. SE thus uses a broad and multidimensional definition of poverty incorporating qualitative and quantitative elements.

### *3.1.4 Participatory Approach*

PA is the broadest of approaches to poverty. Both Monetary and Capability approaches (the latter to a lesser degree) are quantitative bent. They use ‘top-down’ and ‘objective’ tools. The perceptions of the poor and local realities are not accounted for. PA provides an alternative where the common people and the poor themselves define poverty. The methods are flexible (sometimes evolving during field study) and grounded in ‘local reality’. Conventional participatory methods include transects, well-being ranking, focus group discussion, semi-structured interviewing and triangulation (Chambers, 1994a, 1994b, 1994c). The approach is based more on mixed social sciences (Social and Cultural Anthropology, Sociology) than economics.

Each approach has its strengths and weaknesses. Combining different approaches can, perhaps, yield better results in understanding and dealing with poverty. However, the path of integration is not easy since it poses serious epistemological and methodological issues (Kanbur and Shaffer, 2007). However, some signs of success are visible (McGee, 2004). We take, primarily, a participatory stance in this research as it is best suited to bring out the two key points in this research, viz., multidimensionality and local understandings of poverty.

## **3.2 Participatory Approach and Poverty Knowledge**

Based on key concepts in philosophy and major traditions in social sciences, this section relates participatory approach and poverty knowledge.

### *3.2.1 Classical Approach to Knowledge*

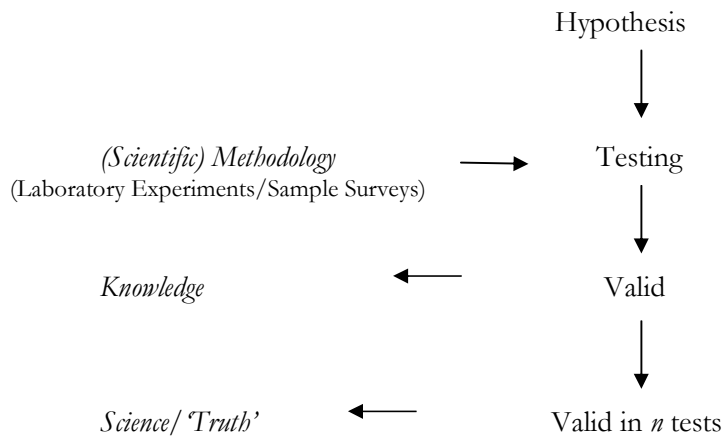
Epistemology is the field of study in philosophy<sup>18</sup> concerned with the origin, processes and validity of knowledge. Epistemology examines questions such as, ‘What is knowledge?’, ‘How do we know what we know?’ and ‘How is knowledge related to belief and evidence?’.

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<sup>18</sup> Philosophy includes different areas of inquiry, notably, Logic, Aesthetics, Ethics and Metaphysics. Metaphysics in turn comprises of Ontology and Epistemology.

Plato's *Theaetetus* offers perhaps the first and most influential definition of Knowledge. Knowledge according to this definition is *justified true belief*<sup>19</sup>. As such, Knowledge is belief that has been justified as true beyond doubt. Concepts like Science and (Scientific) Methodology rest on this. Science is generalizable knowledge. (Scientific) Methodology is a set of procedures used to gain generalizable knowledge. Figure 3.1 presents a simple schema of the process by which scientific knowledge is created. The process starts with *belief* set in the form of hypothesis. Physical sciences (E.g. physics) use methods like laboratory experiments to test hypothesis. Other sciences (E.g. economics) use methods like sample surveys to test hypothesis. A valid hypothesis is considered as Knowledge. A hypothesis valid in all cases becomes scientific knowledge (E.g. a theory) or *Truth*.

Figure 3.1 Creation of Scientific Knowledge



Classical approach to knowledge and science, illustrated in Figure 3.1, rests on three pillars: objectivity, quantifiability and predictability. *Objectivity* implies that there exists (One) ‘Truth’ independent of the researcher. *Quantifiability* implies that ‘Truth’ can be represented in numerical terms. *Predictability* implies that ‘Truth’, since it is valid in  $n$  tests will be valid in the  $n+1^{\text{th}}$  test as well. Methods and theories of physical sciences follow the Classical approach.

<sup>19</sup> *Theaetetus*, written around 360 B.C in the form of a dialogue led by Socrates, asks the question, ‘What is Knowledge?’. See <http://classics.mit.edu//Plato/theatu.html> (Accessed on 03.06.2006) for a translation by Benjamin Jowett. The essence of the dialogue is captured in the statement *justified true belief*. Edmund Gettier, sparking a debate in philosophy, has challenged this definition.

In Social Sciences, two major traditions could be discerned depending on whether or not research follows the Classical approach; Positivist (or loosely, Modernist) and Non-Positivist. Positivist tradition follows largely, the Classical approach searching for objective, quantifiable and predictable ‘Truth’.

Non-Positivist tradition, on the other hand, argues that ‘Science’ as ‘One Truth’ is untenable. The three pillars of Classical Approach are challenged here. Relation between the researcher and the researched is highlighted (replacing *objectivity* with *subjectivity*), role of language in inquiry is brought forth (placing *words* along with *numbers*) and possibility of different, yet valid outcomes is emphasized (substituting *predictability* with *indeterminability*). Non-Positivist tradition comprises of various approaches like Phenomenology, Critical Hermeneutics, Constructivism, Postmodernism and Critical Realism. Despite the differences, these approaches, in general, are marked by a critique of Positivism.

### *3.2.2 Knowledge Bases of Participatory Approach*

As we saw in Chapter 2, participation originated and evolved as a practice oriented approach to poverty and development. Critics have argued that given the empiricist orientation of participation, as manifested in Chambers’s PRA, it is ‘insufficiently theorized and politicized’ (Kapoor, 2002).

Attempts have been made to trace the roots of participation to postmodernist philosophy. Postmodernism, identified popularly with the works of Derrida and Foucault, emerged in the 1970s as a philosophical critique of Structuralism. It has since had pervasive, often divisive, influence on art, architecture, literature and the social sciences (Marchand and Parpart, 1995; Alvesson, 2002; Schuurman; 2002; Simon; 2002). Postmodernism negated meta-narratives and stressed the centrality of discourse. It conceived knowledge as a product of historical, social, cultural and institutional contexts and emphasized the role of power in creating, disseminating and controlling knowledge. Using the Foucaultian notion, Escobar (1985; 1995) demonstrates how knowledge on poverty and development were created and controlled at the global level. In its radical version, poverty knowledge based on the monetary yardstick represents a hegemonic discourse (Rahnema, 1992b; Yapa, 1996). However, as Sellamna (1999) notes,

‘For all their similarities, the theoretical constructions spawned by PRA cannot be simply bundled and explained away as postmodernism in agricultural research and development’.

More recently, responding to various critical points raised against participation (Rahnema, 1992a; Cleaver, 1999; Cooke and Kothari, 2002), Hickey and Mohan (2005) have tried to conceptually relocate participation as ‘an expanded and radicalized understanding of citizenship’. They argue that such a notion is in contrast to mainstream participatory approaches, such as Chambers’s, which are ‘overly voluntaristic’ and could be ‘easily co-opted within disempowering agendas’. They propose Critical Modernism as a theory for understanding Participation. Critical Modernism emerged in the wake of the ‘failure of ... populist, postmodern (and) political economy approaches’. Rather than reject Development as Postmodernism/Postdevelopment does,

‘(Critical Modernism) retains a belief in the central tenets of modernism viz., democracy, emancipation, development and progress, but, theoretically rooted in Post-Marxism, Feminism and Post-Structuralism, it begins from a critique of existing material power relations, particularly a critique of capitalism ‘as the social form taken by the modern world, rather than on a critique of modernism as an over generalized discursive phenomenon’... This faith in Modernism is also ‘scientific’ in that it requires evidence for analysis and action, rather than faith. This avoids romanticizing the capacity of the poor and treating all ‘local knowledge’ as pure and incontrovertible’.

We will neither accept nor reject totally the claims of the different strands in the theoretical debate on Participation. Various philosophical arguments have their significance. While acknowledging that extreme postmodernist relativism must be rejected, we do feel that Postmodernism and PRA have commonalities. Both place emphasis on incomplete and multiple realities. Whereas Postmodernism stresses that there is ‘not One Truth, but many’, participation suggests that there is ‘not One Poverty, but many’. Both celebrate diversity, acknowledging multitude of voices, especially voices that were previously unheard or silenced, like local and traditional knowledge and concerns of women and indigenous people. Similarly, while taking seriously the warning of Critical Modernists on the possibility of being co-opted and agreeing that all ‘local knowledge’ is not pure and incontrovertible, we would still find a spirit of transformation in so-called ‘voluntarism’ and immersion exercises (Pasteur, 2004; Chen et al, 2004; Irvine et al, 2004), and much sense in Chambers’ call for ‘responsible well-being’ and personal change (Chambers, 2004).

Participation, nevertheless, implies diversity of knowledge (relativist ontology and subjectivist epistemology), several ways of knowing (methodological pluralism) and primacy of actors within the structures. In sum, our contention is that Participatory Approach indeed has a non-Positivist, not necessarily anti-Positivist, overtone, though we cannot attribute it to any one philosophical tradition.

### *3.2.3 Participatory Approach and the Methodological Debate*

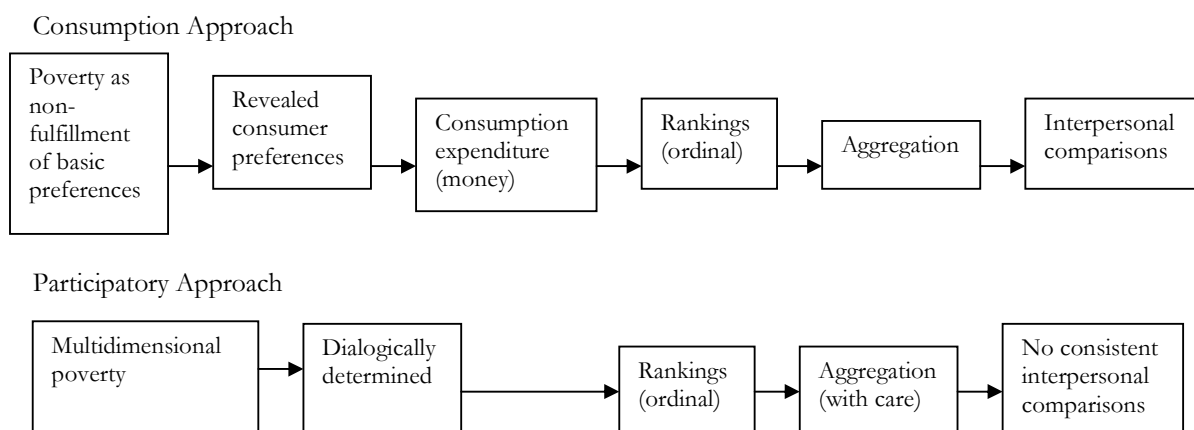
The ‘participatory turn’ in development has led to the design and application of a vast array of research methods. In contrast to conventional expert-made academic and official methods, much of these have been designed by researchers and development workers in consultation with ordinary people. Participatory research methods constantly evolve ‘in the field’. This section discusses the methodological foundations of Participatory Approach. We will also compare and contrast it with the dominant approach to poverty assessment, viz., I/C Approach.

Examining the epistemological and methodological foundations of Participatory Approach vis-à-vis I/C Approach, Shaffer (1996, 2002, 2005) argues that the determination of poverty in the former is monological, stemming from naturalist normative theory, whereas in the latter, it is dialogical, based on discursive normative theory.

In I/C Approach poverty is conceived as the non-fulfillment of ‘basic’ preferences. Consumption modules in household surveys reveal the preferences. ‘Basic’ and ‘non-basic’ preferences are distinguished in terms of minimal levels of caloric intake. Poverty is given a numeric representation because preferences can be numerically transformed into consumption expenditure. This facilitates interpersonal comparison of well-being and aggregation of persons below poverty line.

In Participatory Approach, poverty is conceived as multidimensional. Local or people’s conceptions of poverty are brought to the fore by focus group discussions and semi-structured interviews. Poverty could be represented non-numerically, as narrations and ‘thick’ descriptions, as also numerically (this point is elaborated below), using a well-being ranking exercise, for instance. However, efforts at interpersonal comparison and aggregation should be attempted with caution.

Figure 3.2 Numeric Transformation in I/C and Participatory Approaches to Poverty



Source: Shaffer, 2005: 27

While discussing methodology it is commonplace to position participatory methods at the Qual end of the ‘Qual-Quant’ spectrum. It is true that participatory research result in creating large qualitative information. However, participatory methods do generate lot of quantitative data as well, a fact often overlooked. In terms of the discussion above, Figure 3.2 illustrates how numeric transformation takes place under Consumption and Participatory approaches.

Discussing the implications, Shaffer (2005) concludes that,

- (a) Numeric transformation is possible in I/C Approach as well as Participatory Approach. However, since the two approaches use different conceptions of poverty, results from them may not be fully comparable. ‘(T)he properties of the numbers (that the two approaches generate) are different as are the claims which they can support’.
- (b) Criteria to determine validity of a fixed response household survey (I/C Approach) and a focus group discussion (Participatory Approach) differ. Survey ‘... relies on the notion of an idealized subject and attempts to approximate that ideal in practice by removing or standardizing the ‘investigator effect’’, whereas focus group discussion relies on the notion of an ‘idealized dialog or speech situation’, as it is difficult to eliminate the role of the facilitator.



We largely agree with these conclusions. Our view is that Participatory Approach represents an alternate way of looking at poverty. We do not claim that it is better or worse than I/C Approach. However, there is a key normative difference. Participatory Approach results in a shift of power from the experts, who have seldom lived through poverty, to the lay people, many of whom themselves experience or have experienced it and hence in a better position to explain what poverty means<sup>20</sup>. The experts act as facilitators, with the lay people identifying their problems and, in many cases, analyzing them, resulting ultimately in their empowerment. Such a transformative element is absent in I/C Approach.

Methodologically, we would say that, though an argument could be made for mixing or integrating the two approaches, it is not easy and without tension, in the light of the epistemological differences discussed above. Mixing or integration should be approached with caution so that the inferences drawn from the data/information are not illogical or illegitimate. We, nevertheless, take objection to distinguishing I/C Approach as quantitative and Participatory Approach as qualitative, if the difference is made on the basis of ability to create numerical data. As shown above Participatory Approach can also generate ‘numbers’. Also we will move a step further than Shaffer’s contention that no consistent interpersonal comparisons is possible in the Participatory Approach and argue that participatory methods can indeed provide comparable as well as generalisable numbers. We will, however, delegate this issue as well as the discussion on the operational aspects of quantification and participatory methods to Chapter 4, section 4.3.1 while detailing the methodological approach of this study, ‘The ‘Participatory Numbers Approach’.

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<sup>20</sup> The lived experiences of the poor may be called ‘Life Knowledge’. Life Knowledge ‘... is acquired through seemingly endless experiences and encounters, shaping opinions and points of view towards the self and others’ and unlike academic knowledge that aims at explaining, ‘...life knowledge is directed towards action’ (Krumer-Nevo, 2005).

### 3.3 Participatory Approach and Policy

This section discusses the concept, method and practice of linking Participation, especially knowledge arising from PPA, with policy.

#### *3.3.1 Conceptualizing Participation and Policy*

Keeley and Scoones (1999), in a comprehensive review, examine the ‘policy process’; what is policy and how is it made, what knowledge finds its way into policy and how. The traditional model of policymaking conceptualizes policy as a simple linear process where decisions in the form of statements or formal positions on an issue, taken by those with responsibility for a given area are executed by the bureaucracy. In contrast, a second model views policies as complex, non-linear courses of action, part of ongoing processes of negotiation and bargaining between multiple actors over time. Whereas the first model represents a top-down, prescriptive approach of how things work, the second model, emphasizing the agency of different actors against multiple interfaces (Long and Long, 1992), represents a bottom-up approach.

Taking the case of environmental policy processes, Keeley and Scoones (1999), argue, however, that both these models do not address how knowledge, power and policy are related, and propose a third model that views policy as a discourse. ‘In this view, by mobilizing a legitimizing discourse – and the associated metaphors, labels and symbols of scientific authority – support is granted to ‘official’ policies’. The new conceptualization calls for an alternative approach ‘...that recognizes the contingency of different knowledge claims and so places more emphasis on developing institutions that promote communication and address policy issues through participatory processes of argumentation and deliberation.’ Herein lies the case for inclusion of diverse, local and lay knowledge(s) in policymaking. As for poverty research and action, it is a case for PPA.

Examining the poverty knowledge-policy link, McGee and Brock (2001), concludes on the basis of case studies of two development actors, The World Bank and Oxfam, that it is the situated agency and objectives of the policy actors what matters ultimately in shaping the policies that they propose. In this context, Brock et al (2001) make a call to include in contemporary discourses on poverty, ‘...autonomous spaces created ‘from below’ through more independent forms of social action on poverty related issues’ in

addition to the policy spaces opened ‘...in invited forums of participation created ‘from above’ by powerful institutions and actors’, like The World Bank<sup>21</sup>.

### *3.3.2 Methodological Concerns in Participation and Policy*

Shifting attention from the conceptual sphere of the knowledge-policy link to pure methodological concerns, we are faced with many questions. Can we opt for policy changes on the basis of PPA? What if PPA results and household survey results contradict each other? If we opt for PPA informed policy change, will it (not) be a case of ‘different poverties, different policies’?

(The ongoing search for) answers present caution as well as optimism. Shaffer (2005) argues that PPA results can neither refute nor confirm household survey results because, as discussed in section 3.3.3, the underlying conceptions of poverty of the two are different. Shaffer (1998) provides evidence for this from research in the Republic of Guinea, where gender-related consumption poverty estimated from household surveys was compared with local people’s perceptions on poverty derived through focus group discussions. The study found that household consumption data showed women to be no less poor than men, whereas Participatory Poverty Assessment in the village of Kamatiguia revealed the multidimensional deprivation that women faced. Such a situation, according to Shaffer (2005), leaves the policy makers to make judgment about the relative importance of the two conceptions (since we cannot say one is more correct than the other) as well as about the political constituencies likely to favour one set of ensuing policies over another.

In contrast to this position of caution, McGee (2004) sees optimism based on evidence from household survey results and PPA results in Uganda. Uganda National Household Survey (UNHS) and Uganda Participatory Poverty Assessment (UPPA), results of which both were released at around the same time in late 1999, showed apparently contradictory results. Whereas survey showed that poverty in Uganda had fallen, PPA demonstrated otherwise. However, providing analytical examples, McGee (2004) shows that rather than contradicting each other, UNHS and UPPA are compatible to each other. An example relates to food security. PPA portrayed a picture of decreasing food security whereas survey results showed that many households are selling foodstuffs. However, UNHS attempts to allow for self-provisioning by imputing values for own

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<sup>21</sup> Also in these two related papers, Brock et al (2001) make a review of the shifting narratives of poverty, from growth discourse through basic needs approach and neo-liberal approaches to Poverty Reduction Strategy Papers (PRSP), and McGee and Brock (2001) survey the array of methodological tools for poverty assessment.

consumed food. So, it is possible that a food insecure household has sold food for cash and used cash for purchasing other goods thereby registering increase in consumption. PPA results, thus, do not refute household survey finding that many households are selling foodstuffs. Rather it suggests that it is not the result of surplus, but of factors associated with deteriorating multidimensional well-being, such as insecurity, precarious livelihoods and unstable natural environment. The study concludes that neither PPA nor household survey provide unequivocal statement of what has happened to poverty in Uganda. It is rather, a combination of the two that gave a complete explanation of what has happened.

### *3.3.3 Participation and Policy in Practice*

We finally turn to the practice of participation in policymaking.

Privatization and State withdrawal during the 1980s and 1990s put voluntary private actors in the form of NGOs in the policy picture. In an age of diminishing State, NGOs took up the role of promoters of development. NGOs have been the innovators, first users and leading advocates of participatory development, especially PRA (Chambers, 1994c). 1990s also saw radical changes in the structure of the State, in the form of Decentralization. This brought forth local governments as new policy actors. Participation formed an important constituent in NGO intervention and the practice of decentralized governance. Both local governments and NGOs have been instrumental in linking participation, especially PPA based poverty knowledge, with policy.

Linked broadly to the participatory framework is also the conceptualization and operationalisation of Social Capital (Hickey and Mohan, 2005: 240). The growth of community groups such as Self-Help Groups (SHGs) and Neighborhood Groups (NHGs), often under NGO or local government initiative, has given a formal organizational character to the informal networks and invisible social ties that exist at the local level. Though not policy actors per se, such groups have been instrumental in mobilizing populace and generating opinion at the grassroots. In theory and practice, considerable overlaps exist among the three, viz., NGO intervention, governmental decentralization and Social Capital.

It must be noted, however, that the conceptual and policy arguments for voluntary private initiatives, decentralization and Social Capital are strongly contested. Questions have been raised against the veracity of participation, the way NGOs do it (Mercer, 2002, Townsend et al, 2002 and Petras, 1997). Decentralization, as promoted by The World Bank, is critiqued as part of the Neo-liberal agenda, which will further alienate the poor (Patnaik, 2004<sup>22</sup>). The World Bank version of Social Capital has also been questioned (Bebbington et al, 2004). Furthermore, though participation has been instrumental in the preparation of WDR 2000/01, as evident in the ‘Consultations with the poor’ exercise (Narayan et al, 2000), the politics that went behind the publication of the report (Wade, 2001) as well as the criticisms that followed its publication on the content (Chambers, 2001, Moore, 2001) cast doubts on its effect on policymaking for empowerment of the lay people/poor.

We will conclude by proposing operational definitions of the three viz., NGOs, Decentralization and Social Capital for the purposes of this study.

#### *3.3.3.1 Voluntary Private Initiatives/NGOs*

Lacking universal definition, NGOs represent large set of such heterogeneous groups, small as well as big as development organizations, relief agencies, social service societies, environmental groups, community based groups, pressure groups, charities and so forth and their networks, operating from the local to the global level, in the developing as well as in the developed world, on many issues, in collaboration with each other<sup>23</sup>. In this dissertation we use the term to denote private development organizations operating in rural areas at levels similar to local governments. Chapter 7 examines NGO role in development taking a case from our field research.

#### *3.3.3.2 Decentralization/Local Governments*

Decentralization is ‘...a *political process*<sup>24</sup> whereby administrative authority, public resources and responsibilities are transferred from central government agencies to lower-level organs of the government, or to non-governmental bodies, such as community

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<sup>22</sup> Patnaik, P. (2004). ‘Decentralized Planning v/s World Bank Style Decentralization: A Theoretical Note’, IDEAs, alternatively, ‘A Theoretical Note on Kerala-Style Decentralized Planning’, MacroScan, available at [http://www.networkideas.org/eco/apr2004/print/prnt150404\\_Decentralized\\_Planning.htm](http://www.networkideas.org/eco/apr2004/print/prnt150404_Decentralized_Planning.htm) and [http://www.macrosan.com/the/fiscal/apr04/print/prnt140404Theoretical\\_Note.htm](http://www.macrosan.com/the/fiscal/apr04/print/prnt140404Theoretical_Note.htm) (both accessed on 08.08.2006).

<sup>23</sup> See Vakil (1997) for a review of issues in defining and classifying NGOs.

<sup>24</sup> Emphasis in original.

based organizations (CBOs), ‘third-party’ non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or private sector actors’ (Johnson, 2003). It can mean *deconcentration*, i.e. transfer of political, administrative and fiscal responsibilities to lower units within central line ministries or agencies, *devolution*, i.e. creation of sub-national units of government or strengthening them in terms of political, administrative or fiscal power, *delegation*, i.e. transfer of responsibilities to organizations that are only indirectly controlled by the government, or *privatization*, i.e. transfer of all responsibility for government functions to NGOs or private enterprises independent of the government (Johnson, 2001; 2003). Throughout this dissertation, by decentralization we mean devolution, unless otherwise specified. We will examine the case of PPA and decentralization in Kerala in Chapter 5.

### *3.3.3.3 Social Capital/Networks and Community Groups*

A variously defined and tricky concept, Social Capital appeals to the proponents of both the Neoliberal and the Participatory ideas alike (Harriss and de Renzio, 1997). Intellectual foundations of Social Capital lie in Sociology, Anthropology and Political Science.

McAslan (2002) points out that the current usage of the term has been classified into three different approaches within the social sciences, following Bourdieu, Coleman and Putnam. Bourdieu regards it as a social resource (‘connections’ in common usage) that enables individuals to navigate their position within a hierarchical social structure. Trying to bridge the sociologist’s notion of a socialized actor with the economist’s concept of a self-interested actor, Coleman sees Social Capital as an intangible resource available to individual actors that ‘...exists in the *relations* among persons’ (Coleman, 1988, p. 100-1). More popularly, Putnam views Social Capital as ‘...features of social organization such as networks, norms and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit’ (Putnam, 1995, p. 67). In its efforts at operationalising the concept, The World Bank has approached Social Capital in terms of the formal/informal networks and norms that enable individuals/households to act collectively for common well-being (Woolcock and Narayan, 2000, Grootaert et al, 2004).

Social Capital could be approached from macro (nation, E.g. Putnam), meso (community, E.g. Coleman, World Bank) and micro (household, E.g. Coleman, World Bank) perspectives. This dissertation focuses on Social Capital mostly at the level of households. Chapter 6 extends the notion to the field setting of this study.

**PART II**

**FIELD RESEARCH**





## IV

### FIELD CONTEXT AND RESEARCH METHODS

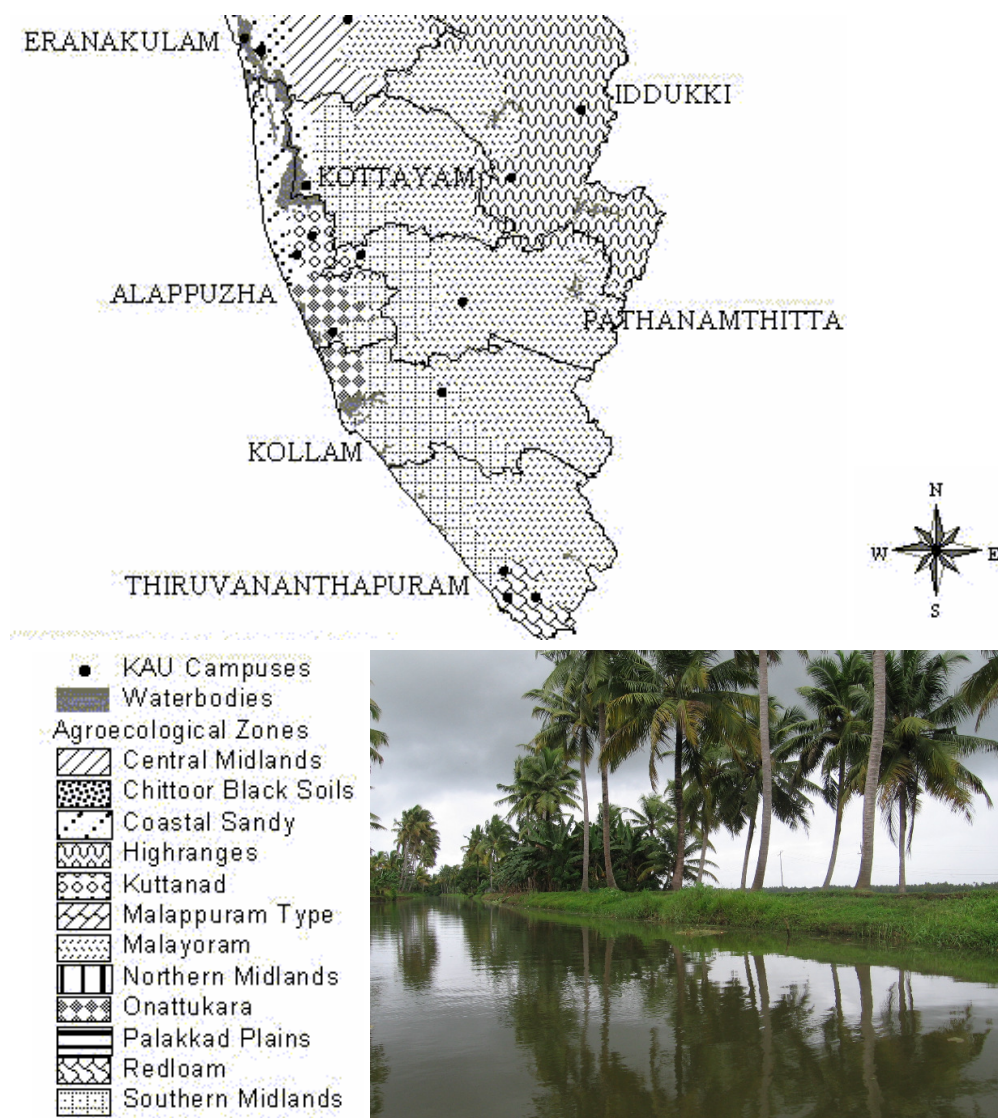
#### 4.1 Introduction

This chapter introduces the field setting of the study and describes the different phases of fieldwork. Section 4.2 chronicles the development story of Kuttanad. Section 4.3 outlines the methodological approach of the study and describes the fieldwork and specific methods. Section 4.4 concludes the chapter.

##### *4.1.1 Introducing Kuttanad*

Kuttanad, a region in Kerala with much distinctiveness, could be introduced in a variety of ways. The geographic description is perhaps the most popular. One of the agro-ecological zones of Kerala, Kuttanad (Map 4.1) is characterized by vast stretches of low-lying land, much of which is paddy fields, and water bodies. Lying below mean sea level, protected by dykes, a large portion of Kuttanad was reclaimed many decades back from the Vembanad Lake. Characteristics and fertility of land varies from one end of Kuttanad to the other, on the basis of which differentiations such as lower Kuttanad and upper Kuttanad and *Kaayal* (reclaimed land lying in the midst of backwaters), *Kari* (swampy land with black peaty soil) and *Kara* (shallow land) lands are made (Kannan, 1988: 232, KSSP, 1992: 27-9, Thomas and Thomas, 1996). Though the exact boundaries of Kuttanad is debated, the region falls within three districts of Kerala, viz., Alappuzha, Kottayam and Pathanamthitta. However, most of Kuttanad lies in the coastal district of Alappuzha. One of the cradles of progressive social movements in Kerala, especially Communism, Kuttanad has been home for noted literary figures in Malayalam (language of the people of Kerala), like Thakazhy Sivasankara Pillai. Traditionally paddy based, Kuttanad is one of the two rice (staple of Malayali people) regions of Kerala, other being Palakkad. An over-studied region, a wealth of literature exists on the history, geography, socio-economics and politics of Kuttanad from the studies of various scholars that it has attracted worldwide since the 1950s.

Map 4.1 Kuttanad – Agro-ecological zones of Kerala (part)



Source: Map ([http://www.kau.edu/pop/map\\_of\\_agro\\_zones.htm](http://www.kau.edu/pop/map_of_agro_zones.htm) , website of Kerala Agricultural University, accessed on 26.09.2006), Picture (fieldwork)

#### 4.1.2 Life and Living in Kuttanad

A simplistic model of life in Kuttanad would comprise of three elements, the farmer, the agricultural labourer<sup>25</sup> and rice. This model is fast becoming irrelevant. Firstly, encounter with modernity has shifted the occupational interests of the younger population from the primary to the services sector. Secondly, this, in addition to low profits from agriculture, has made rice cultivation shrink.

The landscape of Kuttanad consists of contiguous blocks of vast paddy fields (*paadasekharams* or polders<sup>26</sup>) surrounded by protective man-made dykes outside which lie natural canals and rivers. Houses are situated on the dykes as well as on elevated pieces of land inside the polders. Population density is high in Kuttanad with numerous small houses lying side by side on the dykes. Coconut trees, plantain and sundry vegetables also grow on the dykes. Earlier, many households used to have cows and bullock (for ploughing). Duck farming is still popular in the area. Many people still rely on water transport for travel. Much of the polders of Kuttanad are land reclaimed from backwaters. Since they lie below mean sea level, during off-season the polders are immersed in water. Water is pumped out before the onset of cultivation and let in during irrigation. Traditionally there are two cropping seasons, *punja* (October-November to January-February) and second crop (also called *randaam krishi* or *virippu*, May-June to August-September). *Punja* is the popular crop, practiced widely in the majority of Kuttanadan polders, whereas second crop is less popular, taken up in only few polders.

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<sup>25</sup> Other popular livelihood categories in Kuttanad include inland fish workers, lime shell miners, toddy tappers and few coir labourers (KSSP, 1992: 19-24, Thampuran, 2004: 65-75).

<sup>26</sup> Narayanan (2003) uses the term 'polders' (in allusion to the Dutch system of coalition politics) to refer to *paadasekharams*. Cultivating paddy is a collective venture. Furthermore, the early redistribution of land by the government of Kerala and the later fragmentation of land due to inheritance have led to multiple ownership of a single *paadasekharam*. This makes co-operation unavoidable. Farmers' collectives, elected from amongst them, called polder associations (*paadasekhara samithis*) manage cultivation.

## 4.2. Kuttanad's Trajectory of Development

In this section we briefly narrate the trajectory of Kuttanad's development, dividing the story into three phases on the basis of the dominant development questions of the period.

### 4.2.1 *The Social Question of Early Decades*

A discussion on Kuttanad's encounter with development must begin with the land reclamations of the early 19<sup>th</sup> century. This early phase in the development history of Kuttanad is characterized by human success over the might of nature. This is reflected in the challenging efforts at building up vast areas of land for paddy cultivation, from what used to be part of the Vembanad Lake. The end result was the creation of a rice economy. However, this phase is marked with a serious social question, that of the notorious oppressive class/caste structure, resulting in plenty for a few and penury for the masses.

Reclamation of land began in 1834 when the rulers of the then princely state of Thiruvithamkoor decided to support efforts by farmer entrepreneurs like Eravi Kesava Panikkar of Chalayil family and Thomman Joseph of Murikkummoottil family to expand the paddy land (Thampuran, 2004). Labourers in large numbers were brought in to perform the mammoth task of building the first polders. Micro level descriptions of poverty are absent in the official and academic accounts of the early land reclamations. As Narayanan (2003: 97) notes, 'The processes by which the impoverished labour was drawn into the adventures of the wealthy farmers are yet to be written in studies on Kuttanad history'. Richer narrations are found in the literary and fictional works centering on Kuttanad. Nevertheless, an easy conclusion would be that poverty in Kuttanad then was a product of the prevalent social structure.

On the basis of class, the society was divided into a mass of slave agricultural labourers and few landlords (*janmi*). However, the caste distinction was worse and went hand in hand with class differences (Kannan, 1988: 233-6). The landlords in early 20<sup>th</sup> century Kuttanad were the upper caste Hindus or Syrian Christians. The slave agricultural labourers invariably were Harijans, from the Pulaya or Paraya caste including those converted to Christianity. The life and living conditions of the Harijan slaves depended on the upper caste landlord. Among the slaves, there existed hierarchy on the basis of the patronage received from the master. Accordingly, an obedient senior Pulaya was in charge of organizing labourers and harvest. Under the senior came a few attached

labourers. The rest were ordinary casual labourers, with varying degrees of attachment with the master. Those belonging to the Ezhava caste did jobs such as ploughing and owned their own bullocks. The scene, nevertheless, was seldom one of confrontation as everyone observed the social rules and adhered to the caste hierarchy. The masters appeared mostly benevolent, helping the labourers in times of need and during festivities. However, as Kannan (1988) notes, 'Everything the landowner gave had the aura of charity and patronage and was invariably accompanied by various exactions and low wages which was all concealed under the implicit (when necessary explicit) authoritarian command of the landowner'.

With the rise of progressive social movements in Kerala in the 1930s, sweeping changes began to be felt across Kuttanad. Capitalist agriculture resulting in the creation of a rural proletariat, along with the discriminatory caste system, evoked radical responses in this period from the growing Communist movement. This led to organization of agricultural labourers. The first union of agricultural labourers was formed in a meeting in Kainakari in 1939. Simultaneous with the emergence of the socialist movement was the rise of reform movements from inside Hinduism aiming at the emancipation of the lower castes. The story of Kuttanad thereon is one of struggles, often militant, of the low caste agricultural labourers against the landlords to attain their rights.

#### *4.2.2 The Economic Question of the Post-1950s*

The later phase in Kuttanadan history is typified by the success of progressive social movements. Victory of Communists in the first election to Kerala legislature in 1957, after the formation of the province, brought the Party to power, paving the way for landmark legal enactments securing labourers' rights. This led to significant positive changes in the socio-economic life of Kuttanad. Social equity, however, raised new challenges. The economic question dominated the development debate of Kuttanad during the post-1950s, epitomized in the 1990s by arguments for and against paddy cultivation.

Positioned within the wider Kerala context, ‘public action’<sup>27</sup> in the state (Parayil, 2000) resulted in the reduction of absolute poverty, improvement in the quality of life (better access to food, health care and education) and enhancement of social status of the previously deprived in Kuttanad as well. The radical legislative measures relating to land rights (late 1960s) and agricultural wages (early 1970s) that were enacted in Kerala had a huge impact on Kuttanad. Land reforms included firstly, terminating the rights of the *janmi* on tenanted land giving land to the tiller, secondly, conferring ownership rights to the occupants of homestead land (*kudikidappu*), mostly poor agricultural labourers, and thirdly, imposing ceilings on land holdings and redistributing the surplus land to the landless (Ramachandran, 2000: 98-9). The Kerala Agricultural Workers Act of 1974<sup>28</sup> covered not just conditions of employment (wages, hours of work and rest) but welfare provisions (creation of a welfare fund) as well.

Improved social well-being, however, posed an economic dilemma in Kuttanad. The official state policy had envisaged the future development of the region centering on its rice economy. The changed social conditions apparently acted against it. Discussing the issue in richer detail, a recent study (Narayanan, 2003) points to two key issues.

Firstly, the ‘attitudinal shifts’, resulting from high education levels and social mobility, generated aversion to agriculture and preference for service sector jobs. Even while labour surplus and consequent unemployment prevailed, paddy fields encountered labour shortages.

Secondly, the fragmentation of land, an offshoot of land reforms, culminated in two competing perspectives, one attributed to farmers and the other to labourers, on the rice-centric development model of Kuttanad (Narayanan, 2006). The ‘farmer perspective’ argued that paddy cultivation has become unviable or uneconomical and the farmers be allowed freedom in choosing the crop that they cultivate. The state policy, as outlined in the Kerala Land Utilization Order<sup>29</sup>, prohibited conversion of paddy land, being a source of food, to other (cash) crops or constructions (except housing). The ‘labour perspective’ argued that rice cultivation should continue, pointing out the threat to food security as well as the environmental damage and the loss of employment, especially for women. The issue became one of the most debated topics in Kerala, assuming political significance with the ‘save rice field agitation’ of 1997.

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<sup>27</sup> ‘Public action’, according to Dreze and Sen (1989), implies not merely state intervention, but non-governmental, political and individual initiatives in social life as well.

<sup>28</sup> [http://www.kerala.gov.in/dept\\_lab/act5.pdf](http://www.kerala.gov.in/dept_lab/act5.pdf) Accessed 18.04.2007.

<sup>29</sup> [http://www.kerala.gov.in/dept\\_agri/\(rt\)157.pdf](http://www.kerala.gov.in/dept_agri/(rt)157.pdf) Accessed on 09.05.2007

#### 4.2.3 *The Ecological Question of the Present*<sup>30</sup>

Prolonging ecological and economic impasse in a society making complex traverses into the future marks the modern phase of development in Kuttanad. A cursory look at the region today presents images of contrast. On the brighter side are whatever that remains of the picturesque green paddy fields, rich rural life and culinary choices. On the murky side, however, are seasonal floods, lack of hygiene, rampant epidemics, acute scarcity of drinking water and exploitative marketing for tourism.

The roots of the ecological crisis that Kuttanad faces at present could be traced back to the development plans for the region that were designed since the 1950s. The state policy was, as mentioned earlier, to further the rice-centric economy of Kuttanad. To the planners, however, the natural peculiarities of the region posed ‘problems’ that needed to be solved if the policy objectives were to be realized (Narayanan, 2003, KSSP, 1992).

Firstly, a way out had to be found to drain off the water that accumulates during seasonal flooding in Kuttanad. To this, experts proposed the construction of a spillway towards the sea at Thottapally. The work started in 1951 and the spillway, with forty gates, was functional by 1955. However, the structure proved to be an engineering failure as only less than one-third of the expected amount of water passed through it.

Secondly, the salinity intrusion from the sea during summer to the lake and thereby to the paddy fields had to be prevented to facilitate a second crop. Construction of a water regulator at Thanneermukkom was recommended to solve this problem. Though the work started in 1955, the regulator became functional only in 1974. It was idealized that the shutters of the regulator will be lowered from December to June, thus blocking the inflow of saline water. However, the regulator also failed to achieve its objectives.

In addition, the demand for ‘development’, as time progressed, led to the construction of numerous roads and pathways in Kuttanad. The largest among them connects the major border towns of Alappuzha and Changanassery and passes through the centre of Kuttanad.

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<sup>30</sup> Apart from the sources mentioned, this section also draws on insights from fieldwork.

The worst part was that apart from not solving the original problems, the spillway and the regulator put additional pressure on the region, primarily on the environment and thereby on the livelihood of the people. While roads brought in better accessibility, lack of foresight in their construction invited ecological damage and health hazards as well. We will elaborate these points in a little detail.

Several fish species that grow in saline water disappeared over time after the construction of the regulator. The marine varieties lost the backwater area that they used as their nurseries. This, in turn, has affected the livelihood of the fish workers. There prevails currently a conflict of interest between the farmers who want to keep the regulator closed and the fish workers who want it to be kept open. The debate even led to fish workers physically obstructing the closure of the regulator (Narayanan, 2003: 109-10). On the other hand, damages to the spillway and the regulator over time has rendered both partially dysfunctional leading to saline water intrusion enough to damage the farmers' crops.

For several years, prior to the onset of 'planned development' of Kuttanad, water from the highlands would flow from the four major rivers, viz., Pamba, Manimala, Achenkovil and Meenachil, passing through the low lying paddy fields, into the Vembanad Lake, to be finally drained off into the sea. It is said that flooding used to be a cleansing agent of nature that removed the waste of the region. Furthermore, even the greatest flood would not last for more than a few days.

Human intervention in the ecological landscape of Kuttanad, under the pretext of development, however, changed the situation for the worse. As noted earlier, despite the construction of the spillway, flooding continued. Furthermore, the regulator, spillway and the haphazardly built roads created artificial blockages in the natural flow of water (Thampuran, 2004, KSSP, 1992). This, in turn, led to the thriving of weeds, accumulation of pesticides from the paddy fields and human as well as animal waste in the water. Currently Kuttanad faces acute drinking water scarcity, in spite of being surrounded by water. Waterborne and seasonal diseases, such as encephalitis, hepatitis and leptospirosis, being common among its people, the region also has high morbidity.



Being one of the hotspots, Kuttanad backwaters witness large influx of domestic and international tourists every year. With the recent state policy to promote tourism, this number has been on the rise. Doubts about its potential to create employment to local people aside, tourism has aggravated Kuttanad's ecological woes. For example, the large numbers of houseboats that ply to and fro the Alappuzha – Kumarakom belt release fuel, excreta and plastic into the water.

Summing up, Kuttanad, perhaps, offers a good case for Post-Development theorists. Blessed in the past with pristine environment and a self-sufficient economy, albeit in a highly unequal society, the region's encounter with modernity proved disastrous. Ill-being in Kuttanad at present must be viewed not simply as inadequate living conditions at the micro-level, but as the product of a flawed notion of development as well. Contemporary poverty in Kuttanad is more of an ecological nature, than social or economic in the past.

### **4.3 Methodology and Fieldwork**

#### *4.3.1 Locating the Methods*

This study is an attempt to work within the qualitative-quantitative interface, taking a participatory stance. We elaborate on the methodological approach of the study below by taking illustrative examples from literature, some elements of which this study has also limitedly tried to draw upon.

##### *4.3.1.1 Qual-Quant Debate*

The Qual-Quant (Kanbur, 2003) debate and the emergent consensus (Kanbur and Shaffer, 2007) aim at building synergies between qualitative and quantitative methods. Much of contemporary methodological discussions focus on 'integrating', 'combining' and 'mixing' methodologies. In practice, however, this is often misconceived as doing a baseline qualitative study to inform preparation of better questionnaires. This, in fact, goes against the spirit of Qual-Quant. True Qual-Quant, on the other hand, implies methodological pluralism throughout the research process.

An example is the project 'Destitution in Ethiopia's Northeastern Highlands (Amhara National Regional State)' organized by Institute of Development Studies (IDS), Sussex and Save the Children (SC-UK), Ethiopia. The details, objectives, methods and results are available in the project report (Sharp et al, 2003) as well as in Devereux, 2003 and

Sharp, 2003. We, however, are concerned here with the methodology of the project, the way Qual-Quant was operationalised.

(a) *Design of research*: The research design purposefully mixed appropriate qualitative and quantitative components.

Qualitative component included PRA and Anthropology derived community time line/trend line discussions (using rope, stones and beans), life history interviews, historical wealth ranking (to examine mobility, falling into and out of poverty over time), focus group discussions (to understand livelihoods and migration) and mapping rural-urban linkages.

Quantitative component included household questionnaire survey (with participatory exercises and traditional question-answer session mixed, E.g. inclusion of proportional piling to note household income sources, qualitative self assessment of household situation compared to different previous time periods).

(b) *Sampling*: Overlapping random and purposive samples were used for sampling. Household questionnaire survey sample was chosen by random, three-stage, based on stratification by food economy zones. For qualitative consultations, villages were chosen purposively from survey field sites, one from each food economy zone.

(c) *Data collection*: Qualitative and quantitative fieldwork was undertaken simultaneously. Continuous interaction was maintained between field teams. Providing continuous training for questionnaire interviewers ensured quality control. Issues were identified during field study with follow-up case study interviews being conducted with questionnaire respondents.

(e) *Analysis*: Qualitative field data were analyzed using NVivo software and quantitative data using SPSS. Qualitative insights were used to select and scale questionnaire indicators to construct the 'destitution index'. Qualitative and quantitative findings were mixed to give a fuller explanation in the final write-up.

The destitution project, thus, tried to build up on the strengths and synergies of qualitative and quantitative methods from design of research through till analysis and writing up. This study has tried to imbibe the spirit of such efforts.

#### *4.3.1.2 Participatory Numbers Approach (PNA)*

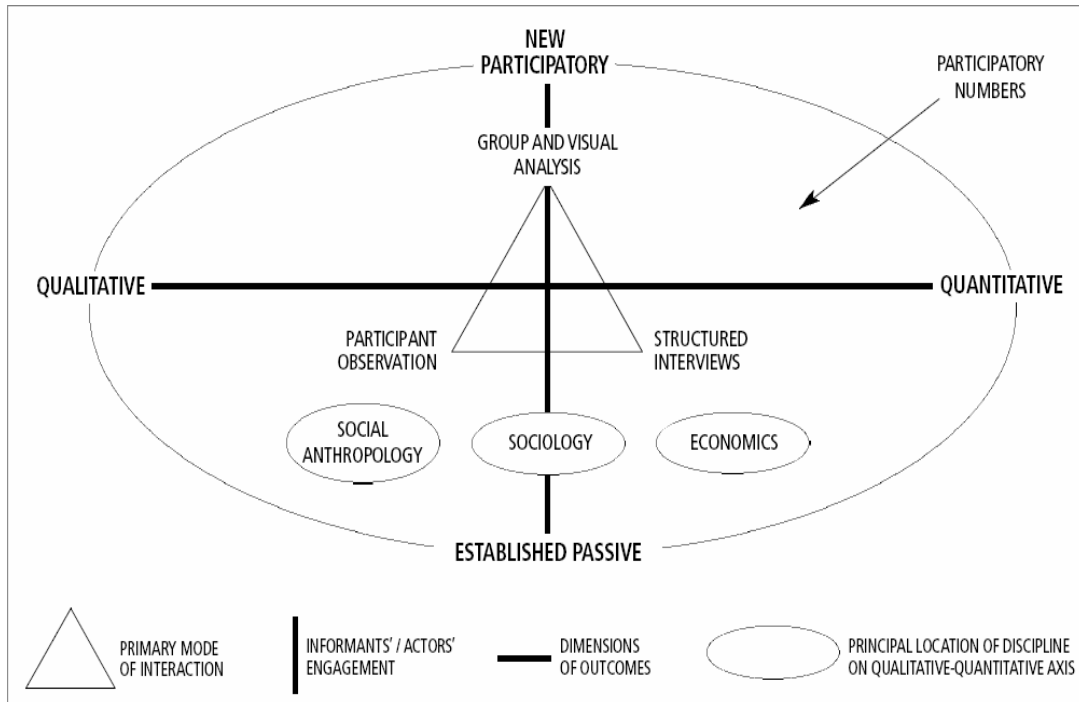
Though coming under the purview of Qual-Quant, the study could more precisely be said to follow what may be called a Participatory Numbers Approach (PNA). This section elaborates this point and introduces PNA.

PNA (Chambers, 2007b) aims at generating academically amenable and policy relevant statistics through participatory field research. As we noted in Chapter 2, participatory methods have recently established themselves as an alternative to the conventional Qualitative-Quantitative dichotomy. Mayoux and Chambers (2005) introduces PNA as the new step at a ‘reversed paradigm’ where systematic and rigorous use of participatory methods is taken to the centre of monitoring, evaluation and impact assessment.

‘The new impact assessment agenda mean that simple ‘rigorous’ measurement of before and after situations for random samples with control group is now rarely sufficient. The new agendas of pro-poor development and improving practice imply new questions, methods and processes to address local priorities, differences between poor people, causality and attribution and to identify and bring about pro-poor change – i.e. the underlying and explicit justification for the large amounts of money spent on impact assessment. Moreover, since the early 1990s experiences of quantification using participatory methods have repeatedly shown how when used well, participatory methods generate not only qualitative insights and but also quantitative data which are generally more accurate than those from conventional survey approaches and methods’ (Mayoux and Chambers, 2005: 272).

In the Qual-Quant/Passive-Participatory spectrum, Chambers (2003) places PNA in the northeast quadrant where group/visual analysis and quantitative dimensions meet (Figure 5.1).

Figure 5.1 Participatory Numbers



Source: Chambers, 2003: 10

Chambers (2003) identifies three streams in PNA on the basis of how the numbers are generated and provides numerous illustrations. Firstly, aggregation from data generated in a participatory manner without much standardization, where the numbers belong to the expert outsider but local people do the identification of priorities and indicators. Secondly, generation, analysis and use of numbers by local people themselves, in a more empowering mode, as in Participatory Monitoring and Evaluation (PM&E). Thirdly, generation of numbers from several sources using participatory methods that are standardized to some degree. Here, the local people produce and use numbers for their localities, but expert outsiders do aggregation beyond that.

In this study, we based our field approach on participatory methods, with local people pointing out the indicators, but we quantified them (see the case study in chapter 5, Part B). As such the research had more of an 'extractive' nature, than empowering.

#### *4.3.2 Fieldwork: Backstage*

Methodology is a crucial, yet unsure, aspect of any field research. The following sections narrate chronologically, the fieldwork and specific methods. In field research one cannot expect things to go in a simple and linear fashion; it was no different in this study.

The empirical part of this dissertation is built upon field research conducted in Kuttanad mostly during 2004-05. However, selection of Kuttanad for this study and choice of research methods were prompted by some experiences during my prior involvement in the area, discussed below<sup>31</sup>.

My encounter with Kuttanad came in 2002 when I joined a project on impact assessment and capacity building of NGOs, undertaken by IVO, Tilburg University, The Netherlands in collaboration with its long-term partner, Department of Applied Economics, CUSAT, India. Saint Berchmans College (SBC), located in Changanassery, the border town of Kuttanad and Kuttanad Vikasana Samithi (KVS), a local NGO based in Kuttanad were also collaborators in the project. As for the project, it was terminated mid-way, late in 2003, due in part to administrative issues. However, the experiences, especially field research during 2002-03 provided fruitful learning in preparing for the doctoral research.

The technical component of the project aimed at assessing the impact of the NGO on the clients, with respect to income generation. Quantitative impact assessment and farm household models (Pitt and Khandker, 1998) formed the theoretical and conceptual basis of the research, while econometric analysis of panel data supplemented by qualitative information formed the methodological core (Hulme, 2000). The key element in field research was a series of LSMS model household surveys with NGO clients as well as non-clients, at regular intervals over a few years. During 2002-03, I was involved in designing and managing two surveys, the first one covering around 200 households and the second covering around 400 households. Questionnaire research had its inherent weaknesses, some of which were addressed in the second round. These included

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<sup>31</sup> This section draws from many sources, other than fieldwork. Firstly, the 'Vikasana Rekha' (Development Report) of Kainakari panchayat for 1996. Every panchayat in Kerala needs to publish this document quinquennially as part of decentralised governance, beginning from 1996. It details the history, geography, socio-economics and politics of the area as well as presents key quantitative data pertaining to various sectors. Secondly, the website of Department of Local Self Government, GoK, [www.localgovkerala.net](http://www.localgovkerala.net). Thirdly, panchayat primary census abstract for 2001 published by the Directorate of Census Operations, Kerala.

limitations in design (E.g. excessively quantitative, time consuming) and problems in implementation (E.g. non-response, poor quality data)<sup>32</sup>. However, what was striking was that many dimensions of development and poverty in the area (E.g. vulnerability of the farmers, having a girl child as a burden), which surfaced during focus group discussions and informal chat with local people, did not seem to figure in the ‘numbers’ that were collected from the field<sup>33</sup>. It was felt that we need to view the many aspects of ill-being, taking into account the peculiarities of Kuttanad and the priorities of the local people. It was based on this thinking that a PhD research was conceived to derive locally relevant dimensions of poverty through flexible research methods. Based on my familiarity with the area, Kuttanad was the obvious choice for field study.

#### *4.3.3 Placing the Research in the Field*

The PhD fieldwork, conducted during 2004-05, began with pilot exercises involving trial and error. An attempt to replicate the ‘Stages-of-progress’ method developed by Krishna (2004) was unsuccessful as it could effectively be not managed. An experimental wealth ranking exercise of a few households, belonging to a women’s group was then tried. Certain insights could be drawn from this, which influenced my field strategy. Firstly, the suggestion to undertake ranking evoked unfavourable response and disinterest from many participants. Rather than ranking each household publicly in front of an outsider, they seemed to prefer specifying general characteristics of different categories of households and letting the researcher draw the conclusions. Secondly, discussions on ‘poor’ and ‘poverty’ brought popular phrases like BPL and *daaridrya rekha* (poverty line)<sup>34</sup> to the fore, with which many participants were familiar. The experience did derive good results, which were indicative of future group meetings as well, though I did not realize it at that time. The draft version of the household interview schedule was also pilot tested with a few households.

Data/information on NGO activities were collected throughout the research period from primary sources (discussions with NGO personnel and clients, attending public events organized by the NGO, accessible official documents) as well as secondary (popular media).

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<sup>32</sup> Krishna (2003) reports similar experience while trying to administer NSSO model questionnaires in villages in Rajasthan in India, which eventually led him to develop a local oriented ‘Stages-of-progress’ methodology to assess poverty.

<sup>33</sup> Jodha’s (1988) pioneering work, discussed in chapter 2, reports similar findings where many local and qualitative dimensions of poverty go unnoticed.

<sup>34</sup> See Chapter 5, Part B.

#### 4.3.4 Selection of Location of Study

Though I had done the pilot in an accessible area in Ramankari, I eventually settled for Kainakari as the location of actual field study. This selection was prompted by many factors. Firstly, Kainakari is typical of Kuttanad region, in terms of geography, socio-economics and politics. I assumed that the research findings could be extrapolated to much of Kuttanad, if not whole. Secondly, the panchayat is widely perceived as one of the most remote areas in Kuttanad. Except for a 4 kilometer tarred road opened for public transport in 2004, connecting a couple of wards of the panchayat with the highway, the whole panchayat is still dependent on water transport. The severity of the major issues facing Kuttanad like absence of provision for safe drinking water, prevalence of seasonal epidemics and agrarian crisis is evident in this panchayat. I thought selecting such an area would eliminate the biases (Chambers, 1983) that development researchers make in choosing field sites that are better off and easily accessible. It would also bring to light the issues I wanted to investigate, like poverty, more vividly. Thirdly, the NGO I studied began its activities in a part of this panchayat, back in 1993, and still retained presence and influence. I felt this would reveal NGO intervention better. Fourthly, I thought existence of two studies, one in the 1970s (Panikar, 1978) and another in the 1980s (Kannan, 1988), based on this panchayat would facilitate some comparison of my data and findings with that about 30 and 20 years back. Finally, I had some familiarity with the panchayat, especially the area where the NGO was active, from the two NGO project questionnaire surveys during 2002-03.

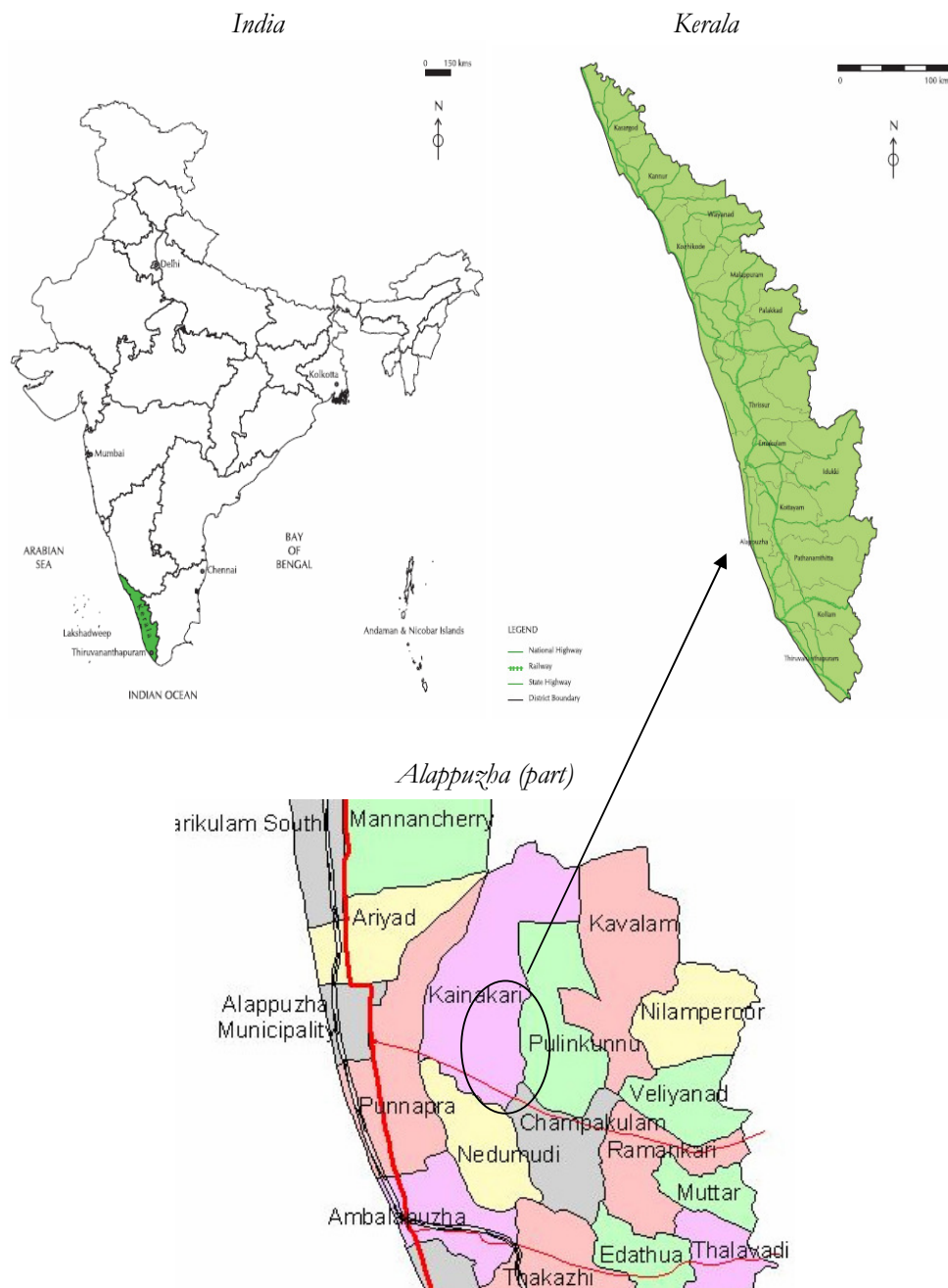
As part of the three-tier local self-government<sup>35</sup>, Kainakari panchayat (Map 4.2) comes under Champakulam block panchayat, which comes under Alappuzha district panchayat. The panchayat had 12 wards at the time of main fieldwork, enhanced to 14 during the last election in 2005. As part of revenue administration<sup>36</sup>, Kainakari north and south villages come under Kuttanad taluk, which is under Alappuzha district. We will follow the local government categorization throughout the study. In the state legislature, Ambalappuzha constituency represents the area. This has significance in the development of the panchayat since much assistance targeted at Kuttanad allegedly goes to the adjoining constituency, which, in fact, is also named Kuttanad.

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<sup>35</sup> The three-tier division for local governance comprises of district panchayats, which are divided into block panchayats, which further are divided into village panchayats. Kerala has 990 village panchayats. Each village panchayat is divided into wards for which democratic elections are conducted every five years through which people's representatives are chosen.

<sup>36</sup> Kerala is divided into 14 districts for revenue administration. Districts are divided into *taluks*, which are further divided into villages. This is different from the three-tier division for local governance as part of decentralisation.

Map 4.2 Location of Study



Source: India, Kerala (GoK, 2006a, p. iv-v), Village panchayats in Alappuzha district ([www.localgovkerala.net](http://www.localgovkerala.net), website of Department of Local Self Government, GoK, accessed on 15.09.2006).



Kainakari panchayat has an area of around 36 square kilometres. Bordered by Nedumudi panchayat in the south, Vembanad Lake in the north, Chennamkari River in the east and Pallathuruthi River in the west, most of the panchayat lie 1.5-3 meters below mean sea level and consists of *Kaayal* land and *paadasekharams*. It is a collection of many islands of *paadasekharams* separated by rivers, canals and streams.

In 2001, the panchayat had 4,480 households, with a population of 20,407. As with rest of Kerala, the panchayat has a female-male ratio of 1.04, in favour of women. Though below state average, literacy level for men is 86.7% and for women, 86.1%. Typical of Kuttanad, agricultural labourers form a large proportion of the population. With the first school started in 1895, the panchayat has adequate basic educational and primary health facilities. However, beneath these rather impressive numbers lie the problems that are echoed in this dissertation.

#### *4.3.5 Operationalisation of Field Research*

Preliminary visits to Kainakari involved meetings with panchayat representatives, attending *Grama Sabha* sessions of different wards, contacting *Kudumbashree* neighbourhood groups (NHGs)<sup>37</sup> and NGO self-help groups (SHGs) and collecting secondary data/information on the panchayat. Participation in *Grama Sabha* sessions proved to be enlightening in more than one respect. Firstly, it gave the avenue for my first direct encounter with villagers. Secondly, I could gain first hand insights into the working of local democracy and decentralisation. Thirdly, and more importantly, the heated debates surrounding identification of BPL households and BPL census 2002 drew my attention. This led to further narrowing of research focus and incorporation of BPL census 2002 variables into my household interview schedule. More on this is discussed in chapter 5 (Section 5.7.1 and Appendix V-A).

Active fieldwork lasted for about 8 months, from August 2004 to March 2005. The fieldwork had two phases – a community level study and a household level study. The community level study extended to many areas in Kainakari and the neighbouring Nedumudi panchayat. However, the household level study was mostly confined to a few wards in Kainakari where the NGO was active.

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<sup>37</sup> *Kudumbashree* NHGs are panchayat level government organised groups akin to NGO SHGs formed in the wake of Kerala's decentralization programme in the late 1990s. See Chapter 5, Sections 5.5 and 5.7.2.

The community level phase of field research was quasi-ethnographic. It involved focus group discussions, informal interviews, observation and triangulation. For most part, I depended on open-ended discussions. However, to derive local meanings of poverty, group discussions were conducted in a structured manner, elaborated in chapter 5, Part B. For formal group discussions, I chose male and female NHGs/SHGs as the unit. The discussions took place during their weekly meetings, always in the evenings, with some time set apart for answering my questions. During the rest for the proceedings, I attended as an observer. Apart from the structured meetings on poverty, the discussions focused on local issues (E.g. absence of transport facilities, scarcity of safe drinking water, pollution from backwater tourism, crisis of paddy, *Kudumbashree*/NGO role, dynamics of group formation and activity and provision of services). Notes were taken during the discussions and elaborated afterwards. The findings were crosschecked during individual interviews and informal chat, thus triangulated.

For the household level study, I selected 100 households in the village. I opted for a purposive sample (Bernard, 2002: 182-4) because of the following reasons. Firstly, my search was for quality and depth of information, than breadth. I also had the experience dealing with large, but unreliable quantitative data from the area during questionnaire surveys for the NGO project. Secondly, I wanted, in my sample, households exhibiting the different dimensions of poverty identified during the community level phase. I interviewed not only poor households, but better off households as well. Also, households that were remotely located were selected. However, the rich households in the village were unavailable for interviews and hence not included in the sample. Thirdly, apart from finding community level issues and generating local meanings of poverty, the study also aimed at drawing some observations on the role of the NGO at the community and household levels. Hence, adequate representation was given to NGO participants in the sample. Along with information on key household characteristics, data on the dimensions of poverty in the BPL census were also collected during household interviews (Appendix IV-A).

Commonalities were identified from the qualitative data/information from group discussions and household interviews. However, no software was used to process such data/information. Quantitative data was processed using SPSS.

A short follow-up visit was undertaken in 2006 to the study area. A brief report was presented to the panchayat policymakers and the NGO on the findings from the study.

This chapter introduced the research context and elaborated the field strategy. Inherent in our approach is an element of reflexivity/subjectivity. However, this is inescapable in field research of this kind (McGee, 2002). The point is to be self-critical and aware of the boundaries of the study. As described in detail, the research process was complex, constantly evolving, 'embracing error' and correcting them in a spirit of 'self-critical epistemological awareness' (Chambers, 2004).

## Appendix IV – A<sup>38</sup>

### Household Interview Schedule

#### A. Identification

1. Household identification number:
2. Date of (first) interview:
3. Duration:
4. Respondent(s):
5. Date(s) of repeat visit(s):
6. Duration, respondent(s):

#### B. Background information

1. Ward:
2. Name of the head: *Male headed/female headed*
3. Address:
4. Route to the household:
5. **Religion**:
6. **Caste**:
7. **Social group**. *SC/ST/OBC/others*

#### C. Household profile (BPL – 7, 8, 9, 10, 12)<sup>39</sup>

1. **Name of the member**. *Members living/working elsewhere, joint family, ill/recently deceased members, girls married off, children given share*
2. **Age**:
3. **Sex**:
4. **Relationship to the head**:
5. **Education**: *Discontinued education, still studying, public/private educational institution*
6. **Occupation and Income**: **Primary/secondary** and *multiple/seasonal occupations/livelihood (E.g. agricultural labour, fish worker, local casual labour), un/under employment, number of days worked in different occupations last season/year, daily/monthly income from different occupations last season/year, amount of paddy harvested last season/year (for agricultural labour), remittances from elsewhere*
7. Household history outline (focus on the last 5-10 years): **Occupation of the previous generation**, *time of formation of the household, early periods, key events (E.g. birth, education, getting/losing job, marriage, migration, buying land, construction of house, crop loss, accident, health), present*

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<sup>38</sup> Note: This schedule was administered not in a questionnaire fashion. Except for B 5, 6, 7 and C 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, all sections were covered as structured discussion. Topics in 'bold' were compulsorily addressed to all households. Data/information on some sections (like 'Food Intake', I 2), were collected only from select households.

<sup>39</sup> Literacy status ( ), Status of labour ( ), Means of livelihood ( ), Status of children ( ), Reasons for migration ( ).

#### D. Physical living conditions

1. **House type** (BPL – 2)<sup>40</sup>: *Kutchha/pucca/in between/modern, ownership, received any help in construction from State/NGO/religion/community/others*
2. **Electricity**: *Since when, (Bi-) monthly expenditure*
3. **Toilet** (BPL – 5)<sup>41</sup>: *Inside the house/outside, sharing, no proper toilet, condition, received any help in construction from State/NGO/religion/community/others*
4. **Water**: *Inside the house/outside nearby/outside far away, received any help from State/NGO/religion/community/others, provision during monsoon/months of inflow of saline water*
5. **Clothing** (BPL – 3)<sup>42</sup>: *sufficiency*

#### E. Assets

1. **Land** (BPL – 1)<sup>43</sup>: *Homestead, farm land and rented in/out land, amount, value, mode of acquiring (kudikidappu/michhabhoomi/inherited/bought), mode of renting in/out (pattom, otti), possession of legal documents of ownership*
2. **Livestock**: *Type, amount, provided by State/NGO/religion/community/others*
3. **Other**: *Machines/farm machines (E.g. sewing machine, 'methi' machine)*

#### F. Durables

1. **Ownership of durable items** (BPL – 6)<sup>44</sup>: *Electric fan, television, quality furniture, appliances (E.g. refrigerator)*

#### G. Transport and communication

1. **Transport**: *Mode of transport (canoe/boat), purpose of travel, difficulties experienced (waiting for a boat, monsoon and flooding, urgency), expenditure on travel*
2. **Ownership of vehicles/automobiles**: *Canoe, boat, bicycle, two-wheeler, four-wheeler*
3. **Communication facilities**: *Post (nearest post office) **Phone** (Own/neighbours/public phone), expenditure*

#### H. Health

1. **Health issues**: *Illness during the previous year, **major/minor/prolonged/permanent illness/handicap**, expenditure on medicines and health, **type of hospitals visited (private/public)** and where, deferred treatment, help/awareness from State/NGO/religion/community/others*

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<sup>40</sup> Type of house ( )

<sup>41</sup> Sanitation ( )

<sup>42</sup> Availability of clothing ( )

<sup>43</sup> Size of land holding ( )

<sup>44</sup> Ownership of consumer durables ( ). Ownership of machines in E 3, automobiles in G 2 and telephone in G 3.

## I. Food intake and cooking

1. Cooking: **Major cooking medium** (gas stove/kerosene stove/traditional medium) and fuel (cooking gas/firewood/other), cost of fuel, help from State/NGO/religion/community/others (E.g. kerosene from ration shop/firewood through ayalkoottam)
2. Food intake (BPL – 4)<sup>45</sup>: Number of meals, decrease/increase in quantity of food taken, place of purchase (ration shop/palacharakku kada/town/ayalkoottam), payment (paid at once/in instalments), help from State/NGO/religion/community/others (government schemes, ration shop, gift or in kind transfers), food intake the previous normal day ( \_ \_ / \_ \_ / 20 \_ \_ ) for adult male, adult female and child, frequency of consumption of select items (meat/fish/egg/milk/vegetables/fruits)

## J. Debt and savings

1. **Debt** (BPL – 11)<sup>46</sup>: Source (local money lenders/institutional sources/ayalkoottam/other), purpose (productive/consumption, E.g. dowry and marriage expenses, housing), amount, interest, duration (long-term/short-term)
2. **Savings and Jewellery**: Amount, purpose (E.g. dowry)

## K. Access to support

1. **Informal support (Social capital)**: Sources of help in times of need (relative, neighbour, SHG/NHG), help from same locality/other place, mode of assistance, instances during recent past
2. Formal support: **Government schemes** (housing, social groups), **pensions and social security** (agricultural labour, fish worker, unemployment allowance), Agriculture extension (seed/livestock)
3. Government assistance sought (BPL – 13)<sup>47</sup>: Assistance sought from the government

## L. SHG/NHG activity

1. **NGO SHG/NHG and Government SHG/NHG**: Male/female member(s)/reasons for not being member, membership details (since when, frequency of meetings, number of members, members quit/joined in between and reason, previous/simultaneous association with other groups and reason, activities E.g. micro-credit, income-generating activities, training and other external assistance, savings, loan, purpose, perceptions on SHG/NHG role)

## M. Priorities of the household

1. **List ordinally the current three priorities of the household**

## N. Self-assessment of household trajectory

1. **If you compare the present situation of your household to that 10-15 years back (choose a key event in the household history outline), do you feel that the situation has improved? Have you moved up/fallen down/remained the same? How/Why?**

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<sup>45</sup> Food security ( )

<sup>46</sup> Type of indebtedness ( )

<sup>47</sup> Assistance preferred ( ); Household BPL Score ( )

## POLICYMAKERS' APPROACH vis-à-vis PEOPLES' APPROACH TO POVERTY

### 5.1 Introduction

The questions, who are deemed poor and how, are as much political as they are methodological. In India, these issues are addressed in terms of what is called 'BPL' or Below Poverty Line, a categorization that 'produces'<sup>48</sup> households or individuals that are officially deemed poor. As Corbridge et al (2005: 47) notes in their excellent study of the interaction of the poor with the Indian State,

'...it is clearly the case that production of poverty by various government and other agencies creates many of the spaces within which 'poorer people' are bound to see 'the state'. The designation of households in India as Below Poverty Line (BPL) positions them as beneficiaries of development programmes which require them to have contact with the *sarkar*<sup>49</sup>,

The central concern of this chapter is how the *sarkar*, on the one hand, and the poor themselves, on the other, find the BPL beneficiaries. We do not, however, address the political issues involved, which Corbridge et al (2005) have demonstrated in their North Indian empirical research. Our focus is on the conceptual and methodological issues related to identifying the poor.

This chapter is divided into two parts:

Part A focuses on the approach and the responses to poverty by the national Government of India (GoI) and the state Government of Kerala (GoK). This includes a short overview the structures of the production of the numbers of the poor as well as the key rural poverty targeting programmes.

Part B presents a case study that forms the empirical core of this dissertation. Drawing on the participatory fieldwork as well as the household survey that we conducted in Kuttanad, the case study examines how the GoI, the GoK and the local people in the study area identify the poor, i.e. the BPL beneficiaries.

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<sup>48</sup> Usage à la Escobar, 1995, Yapa, 1996.

<sup>49</sup> *Sarkar* in Hindi denotes authority, or more commonly 'the government'.

**Part A:**  
**Policymakers' Approach and Responses to Poverty**



## 5.2 Poverty Monitoring in India

Ranking of India by international agencies is indicative of its position in the global development map. According to The World Bank classification<sup>50</sup>, India is one among the Low Income countries, implying income poverty. It is also one among countries with Medium Human Development according to the UNDP classification<sup>51</sup>, implying multidimensional deprivation (capability poverty). But, how does the national policymakers view poverty?

Though multidimensional well-being is often referred to<sup>52</sup> while assessing the progress towards poverty reduction, the national level poverty policies in India are largely informed by income/consumption poverty estimates. As such, there are two sources of consumption expenditure data in India, one, the Household Consumer Expenditure Surveys of the National Sample Survey Organization (NSSO), and the other, the National Accounts Statistics (NAS) of the Central Statistical Organization (CSO). However, differences exist in the way the NSSO the CSO collect data, leading to discrepancies in the poverty estimates resulting from the two. Whereas the CSO estimate is available as a macro estimate and a scalar for the nation as a whole, the NSSO estimates are available separately for different states in rural as well as urban areas, which can be aggregated to a national estimate (Sharma, 2004, 19-26). Earlier, the NSS consumption expenditures used to be adjusted to ensure consistency with the NAS consumption expenditures. However, following the recommendations of the Expert Group on Estimation of Proportion and Number of Poor (GoI, 1993) this practice was discontinued. At present, the national and state-level consumption expenditures and the poverty estimates derived from them rely exclusively on the NSSO data. The NSSO

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<sup>50</sup> <http://devdata.worldbank.org/wdi2006/contents/income.htm>, (Accessed on 18.05.2007) World Development Indicators (WDI) of the World Bank (the latest being WDI 2006), classifies countries into four, Low Income (GNI per capita of \$765 or less in 2003), Lower and Upper Middle Income (GNI per capita of \$766-9,385 in 2003) and High Income (GNI per capita of \$9,386 or more in 2003), progressing from the worst to the best in terms of income.

<sup>51</sup> UNDP (2005) classifies countries into three in terms of Human Development Index (HDI), Low (HDI below 0.500), Medium (HDI 0.500-0.799) and High Human Development (HDI 0.800 and above).

<sup>52</sup> The first National Human Development Report in India was prepared by the Planning Commission in 2001. See <http://planningcommission.nic.in/reports/genrep/nhdrep/nhdreportf.htm> (Accessed on 18.05.2007). Given the great diversity in the country, the various state governments have also prepared sub-national State Human Development Reports, the first being Madhya Pradesh in 1995. See [http://www.undp.org.in/index.php?option=com\\_content&task=view&id=22&Itemid=9](http://www.undp.org.in/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=22&Itemid=9) (Accessed on 18.05.2007).

methodology, in turn, has undergone revisions in the recent past that has triggered much controversy<sup>53</sup>.

Summing up, at the national level, the GoI uses the estimates of the Planning Commission, which comes from the surveys of the NSSO, to monitor progress in poverty reduction. During 1999-2000<sup>54</sup>, these estimates put the proportion of poor in rural India at 27.09 percent, based on Rs. 327.56 monthly per capita poverty line, and in urban India at 23.62 percent, based on Rs. 454.11 monthly per capita poverty line (Sharma, 2004).

### 5.3 Responses of GoI

The Indian experience could well be unique, in terms of the extensive and diverse nature of State-led poverty targeting programmes.

Corbridge et al (2005: 64-71) traces the origins of the proliferation of anti-poverty schemes in India to the *Garibi Hatao* (Eliminate Poverty, in Hindi) slogan of the 1970s, when ‘the poor’ was invented as a political constituency and ‘the production of new technologies of government’ defined a BPL population. Whereas the BPL population was targeted *en masse* on the one hand, through a number of programmes such as the IRDP (Integrated Rural Development Programme), BPL sub-groups were created and specifically targeted, on the other, through several schemes such as TRYSEM (Training of Rural Youth for Self-Employment), for BPL rural youth or DWCRA (Development of Women and Children in Rural Areas), for BPL women and children.

It is not our objective to review the various poverty targeting programmes of GoI and their associated niceties<sup>55</sup>. What must be noted, however, is that being labeled as BPL or not is a matter of immense significance to the poor in India as the eligibility to many of these programmes and schemes as well as the access to various benefits, including

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<sup>53</sup> See, Deaton and Dreze, 2002, Deaton and Kozel, 2005, Palmer-Jones and Sen, 2001, Popli, Parikh and Palmer-Jones, 2005, Sen and Himanshu, 2004a, 2004b for a sample of the numerous and ongoing technical debates on the ‘puzzles’ of Indian poverty figures and adjustments to data to get ‘closer to truth’.

<sup>54</sup> NSSO conducts ‘thin’ sample surveys every year and ‘thick’ sample surveys quinquennially (i.e. every five years). It is the data from the quinquennial ‘thick’ sample surveys that are used to derive poverty estimates, as the annual ‘thin’ sample does not allow drawing reliable estimates at the state level. The estimates of the latest quinquennial survey conducted in 2004-05 have been published recently (GoI, 2007). We, however, use the poverty figures from the 1999-2000 survey, in this thesis.

<sup>55</sup> See, Srivastava (2004) for a recent overview of a number of poverty targeting programmes in India. Corbridge et al (2005: 275-82) also summarises the major national programmes and policies related to poverty alleviation.

subsidized basic foods through the Public Distribution System (PDS), are restricted to (members of) BPL households only<sup>56</sup>.

The process of production of the number of the poor in India, nevertheless, is highly technistic and expert-led, as we briefly saw in Section 5.2. Muddled with methodological puzzles, poverty is looked at ‘...like a physical object separated from social relations, and households...(are)...treated to schemes that would ‘raise’ them above the ‘line’” (Corbridge et al, 2005: 70). How does this impact on the identification of the BPL households by GoI is an issue that we will discuss as part of the case study in Part B, section 5.7.1.

From this short discussion it also appears as though the central tendency at the policymaking levels of GoI is devoid of concerns like participation of the poor or their empowerment. Poverty policymaking in Kerala state presents a picture of contrast. Drawing inspiration from the participatory approach, GoK has involved lay people in devising innovative methods to find the BPL households and tackle poverty. The ensuing sections take up the approach and the responses of GoK to poverty.

#### **5.4 ‘The Kerala Experience’ and Poverty**

Since the CDS-UN study of the 1970s (CDS, 1975), much has been written about Kerala’s unique development experience (E.g., Mencher, 1980, George, 1993, Parayil, 2000, GoK, 2006a). Over time, the state saw considerable reduction in absolute poverty and rise in the quality of life of its people. This was achieved on account of the confluence of a number of social, economic and political factors.

Firstly, the social reform movements in the early 1900s brought about radical changes in the social structure. Whereas, the Hindu reformists broke the hierarchical caste system removing social discrimination to a large extent, the Communist movement propagated progressive ideals eliminating class exploitation. In addition, the dedicated service of the Christian missionaries spread education at the grassroots (Mathew, 1999). Secondly, after the state was formed in 1957, successive governments introduced progressive reforms such as land redistribution (1960s), total literacy initiative (1980s), decentralization (1990s) and numerous social welfare schemes (Lieten, 2002). Thirdly, migration of a large number of educated as well as semi-skilled Malayali people since 1970s to the rest of India and more importantly abroad, initially to the Persian Gulf and subsequently to other parts of the world, provided large remittances that sustained the economy (Zachariah et al, 1999).

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<sup>56</sup> There is also a sub-categorization of the BPL called *Antyodaya* (AAY) aimed at the most deprived.

Table 5.1: Kerala's Development Indicators During 1990s

	Kerala	India	Low-income countries	United States
<b>Per-capita GNP in \$ US</b>	324	390	350	28,740
<i>at purchasing power parity (PPP)</i>	1,371	1,650	1,400	28,740
<b>Adult literacy rate as % of total adults</b>				
<i>males</i>	94	65	65	96
<i>females</i>	87	38	41	96
<i>scheduled caste females</i>	74	24	-	-
<i>scheduled tribe females</i>	51	18	-	-
<b>Life expectancy in years</b>				
<i>males</i>	67	62	58	74
<i>females</i>	72	63	60	80
<b>Infant mortality per 1,000</b>	13	65	80	7
<i>rural</i>	15	82		
<i>urban</i>	7	45		
<b>Birth rate per 1,000</b>	18	29	40	16

Source: Compilation from various sources adjusted for differences, Franke and Chasin, (2000: 18)

Till the 1990s Kerala was characterized by the paradox of high human development, in spite of a low income (see Table 5.1), which resulted in the popular phrase, 'Kerala Model' (lately 'Kerala Experience') of Development (Parayil, 2000: 1-15). On the flip side of the social success of Kerala lay economic woes manifested in high educated unemployment, decline of agriculture, low industrialization, poor quality of social services and excessive reliance on unstable remittances. This led to much debate and introspection, especially in the wake of the fiscal crisis of the early 1990s (George, 1993), posing questions on the sustainability and the replicability of Kerala's development experience.

Later developments have, however, outlived this skepticism. Kerala's Net State Domestic Product has been growing higher than the all-India rate during the period from 1987-88 to 2002-03 compared to the period from 1970-71 to 1986-87 (Kannan, 2005). Even as the primary and the secondary sectors recorded lower growth rates than the national average, the tertiary sector recorded higher growth rate, compensating the other two, thereby accounting for the difference. The current thinking is that Kerala's high social achievements in the past are paying off at present. The state has moved into a 'virtuous phase' of development with '...human development and economic growth...reinforcing one another positively, in contrast to the earlier experience of 'human development lopsidedness' (with weak economic growth)' (GoK, 2006a: 2, Chakraborty, 2005). It is also expected that this, in future, will reflect on improvements in the quality of services.

How then do GoI and GoK view poverty in Kerala? As we noted before, GoI uses the income/consumption approach to monitor and tackle poverty. Based on NSSO data, Planning Commission estimates that the proportion of people in (income) poverty in rural Kerala has been falling continuously from 39.03 % in 1983 to 25.76 % in 1993-94 and to 9.38 % in 1999-2000 (Sharma, 2004). However, GoK has taken strong objection to the GoI view of poverty on conceptual, methodological and political grounds.

Conceptually, GoK views poverty in a multidimensional manner. In its policy documents this has been stated explicitly (GoK, 2006b: 353-8). The Chief Minister of Kerala, in the annual National Development Council Meeting in 2002, highlighted the state's view as well as concerns against the GoI approach, 'I am happy at the shift to a basically non-monetary index system (referring to the new BPL census method discussed in section 5.7.1). But here again a uniform set of criteria has been prescribed for all states by GoI'. The Chief Minister argued further that '...the state needs to have poverty assessment based on locally relevant criteria. It is impractical and unscientific to follow a common set of factors for the whole country'<sup>57</sup>. In tune with these sentiments, GoK has gone forward to develop its own methods to monitor multidimensional poverty (section 5.7.2) and devised schemes to tackle it (section 5.5).

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<sup>57</sup> <http://planningcommission.nic.in/plans/planrel/pl50ndc/kerla.pdf> Accessed on 22.05.2007

Methodologically, GoK has argued that even while going by the calorie norm implicit in the GoI approach to poverty, Kerala has much more poverty than what GoI estimates. The Draft Approach Paper for Kerala's Eleventh Five-Year Plan<sup>58</sup> notes that rural poverty in Kerala would be 60 %, taking 2100 calories per person per day as the poverty line. The estimates by Patnaik<sup>59</sup> have been taken as the basis for this claim.

Politically, a drastic reduction in poverty figure from 25.76 % (1993-94) to 9.38 % (1999-2000) would have serious consequences. Firstly, slicing a large number of people off from their BPL status would result in social and political resentment. Secondly, it is based on the NSSO poverty estimates that GoI allocates funds for the various poverty targeting programmes of the states. If GoK tries to compensate for the loss, it will add greater woes to the already vulnerable fiscal situation of the state.

## 5.5 Responses of GoK

As we noted earlier, 'public action' (Dreze and Sen, 1989) has been a key characteristic of Kerala's development experience. A major component of 'public action' in Kerala has been state intervention. As many as 35 social security schemes have been introduced in Kerala by successive governments (GoK, 2006a: 49)<sup>60</sup>.

Originally, Kerala followed a poverty reduction strategy in tune with that at the national level. However, as GoK (2006b: 362) observes: '...the failure of anti-poverty programmes in the past can be attributed to...lack of involvement of beneficiaries...poor understanding of poverty and its causes and manifestations (and) the top down approach...'. This has made the state adopt a participatory strategy to poverty reduction, popularly called *Kudumbashree*, implemented by the State Poverty Eradication Mission (SPEM), through the local governments. Local governments started taking a key role in development and poverty reduction in Kerala after the decentralisation

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<sup>58</sup> [http://www.kerala.gov.in/dr\\_app.pdf](http://www.kerala.gov.in/dr_app.pdf) Accessed on 22.05.2007

<sup>59</sup> Patnaik, U. (2006) 'Poverty and Neoliberalism in India', available at <http://www.ideaswebsite.org/featart/jan2007/Neo-Liberalism.pdf> (Accessed on 22.05.2007).

<sup>60</sup> See GoK (2006a: 49-55) for the details of the various schemes like public distribution system, free noon meal scheme for school children, nutrition scheme for pre-school children and women, pensions to destitutes and labourers, welfare funds for informal labourers, housing schemes etc. The micro level impact of some of these could be noted in Chapter 6, when we examine household responses.

programme launched in the late 1990s (Heller, 2001)<sup>61</sup>. At present, poverty targeting programmes in Kerala, be it centrally sponsored schemes<sup>62</sup> such as Sampoorna Gramin Rozgar Yojana (SGRY) or other, are all implemented by the local governments<sup>63</sup>.

*Kudumbashree* ('Prosperity of the Family', in Malayalam)<sup>64</sup>, the innovative poverty reduction programme of GoI that is now well-known in development circles, involves, primarily, the organisation of rural people (initially women, now irrespective of gender) into Neighbourhood Groups (NHGs)/Self-Help Groups (SHGs) called *Ayalkootam* (GoK, 2006a: 153-8). Since decentralisation in Kerala basically implies devolution<sup>65</sup>, local governments have much political, administrative and fiscal power. This makes it possible for them to implement development plans prepared by the local people based on their needs and priorities. A feature of *Kudumbashree* that is of interest, as far as our discussion is concerned, is the methodology to identify the poor households and estimate poverty through PPA, which is described in section 5.7.2. Veron (2001) terms the new developments, in the context of decentralisation as The 'New Kerala Model', which seeks to reconcile the social, productive and environmental objectives at the local level and tries to develop synergies between the state, NGOs and civic movements.

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<sup>61</sup> See, Isaac, T. M. T. (2000) 'Campaign For Democratic Decentralisation in Kerala', for a detailed overview. Available at <http://www.archonfung.net/papers/isaac.pdf> (Accessed on 22.05.2007). See also, footnote 35, Chapter 4.

<sup>62</sup> See, Srivastava (2004) for details on centrally sponsored schemes.

<sup>63</sup> GoK (2006b: 361-403) discusses the various programmes in the state targeted at poverty reduction and improvement in the living standards of various social groups, including the scheduled castes/tribes.

<sup>64</sup> See <http://www.kudumbashree.org/>

<sup>65</sup> See Chapter 3, Section 3.4.3.2.

**Part B:**  
**Policymakers' Approach vis-à-vis Peoples' Approach –**  
**A Case Study<sup>66</sup>**

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<sup>66</sup> This case study is based on a paper, Thomas, B.K, R. Muradian, G. de Groot and A. de Ruijter (March 2009) 'Multidimensional Poverty and Identification of Poor Households: A Case from Kerala, India', in press with *Journal of Human Development and Capabilities*. Comments from Luuk van Kempen, Vinish Kathuria, the anonymous reviewers, participants at the meeting of the Multidimensional Poverty Working Group of EADI/DSA at Warsaw (15-16 December 2005) and the Development Economics PhD Seminar at Maastricht (30 April 2006) and colleagues at IVO on earlier versions of this paper are acknowledged. An entry based on the paper was selected by IFPRI through a global competition as one among ten leading doctoral studies on poverty and invited to be presented at the doctoral students workshop organized as part of the IFPRI 2020 Vision Conference at Beijing (16 October 2007).

Identification of BPL households being a topical issue, the relevance of some aspects of this case study may have been superseded by recent developments. Nevertheless, the essence of the argument remains valid.



## 5.6 Rationale of the Study

In the extant literature dealing with operationalising the multidimensional approach to poverty, the choice of dimensions (Alkire, 2002) and the weighting of indicators (Qizilbash, 2004) are the issues that have frequently been addressed. Relatively less attention has been given to the question whether the view on poverty of those who are affected by the policies converges with that of the policymakers. While it is true that participatory research has delved into the gaps between the views on poverty of actors operating at different levels on poverty (such as experts v/s villagers) and emphasized on bridging these (Chambers, 1995; McGee, 2004), specific case studies can throw more light on this.

McGee (1999) used participatory methods to identify poor households in a village in Colombia, based on the perceptions of the villagers on poverty and compared the results with those arrived at by applying the method used by the government. The study noted divergences between the two, indicating that the government targeted households different from those identified poor by the villagers using their own criteria. Such studies are important since the differences in the understanding of poverty between the policymakers and the lay people may lead to poorly designed poverty targeting programmes.

In this case study, we compare and contrast the view on poverty of the lay people in our study area, with that of the national and state governments. Drawing from field research, we devise a 'local method' to identify poor households in the area, based on the local peoples' poverty criteria. We generate locally relevant 'numbers' from qualitative fieldwork, thus contributing to the attempts to combine qualitative and quantitative approaches (Kanbur, 2003) and the evolving paradigm of 'participatory numbers' (Mayoux and Chambers, 2005; Chambers, 2007b). We examine the extent to which the local method converges or diverges with the multidimensional methods used by the national (BPL Census 2002 method) and the state governments (Kerala *Kudumbashree* method) in identifying poor households.

## 5.7 Policymakers' Poverty: Official Methods to Identify the Poor

### 5.7.1 Identification of the Poor by GoI

In India, macro level estimates of poverty are based on the survey data of National Sample Survey Organisation (NSSO), as we noted earlier. However, to identify the poor households to be targeted for assistance from the government, the Ministry of Rural Development of GoI commenced a quinquennial BPL census in 1992. The first census used the then income poverty line as the criterion to identify BPL households. It resulted in a higher poverty figure that did not correspond with the estimates of the NSSO. An expert body was set up by GoI to propose an improved methodology for BPL census 1997. This committee recommended 'exclusion criteria' to screen better-off households and expenditure to identify the poor from among the remaining ones. This census also came up with estimates of poverty that did not match the NSSO figures.

For the latest BPL census in 2002, another expert group was formed, which recommended an indicator-based methodology – henceforth 'the BPL method' – for identifying the poor, doing away with income and expenditure. The new methodology identifies poor households using thirteen indicators relating to size of landholding, type of house, availability of clothing, food security, sanitation, ownership of consumer durables, literacy status, status of labour, means of livelihood, status of children, type of indebtedness, reasons for migration and assistance preferred from the government. Each of these could be scored from zero to four so that score for a household could range from a minimum of zero to a maximum of fifty-two (Sundaram, 2003). Higher the score, better-off is a household<sup>67</sup>.

Academics pointed out methodological weaknesses in the new approach (Hirway, 2003; Sundaram, 2003) whereas activists voiced flaws in its implementation (Jain, 2004). Better-off states like Kerala also recorded opposition. In the BPL method there is no pre-determined cut-off, but the states were advised to keep the final poverty figures in the range of +/-10 percent of the NSSO estimates for 1999-2000. This will have financial and political consequences in Kerala, which has, based on NSSO estimates, rural poverty of only 9.38 percent (Sharma, 2004: 10) whereas GoK claims it is much higher. In fact, NSSO sample survey and BPL census have different objectives and use different methodologies. Hence, one is left to wonder about the 'logic in reducing the estimates of poverty of one kind to match the other kind of poverty!' (Hirway, 2003). This also

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<sup>67</sup> See Appendix V-A.

confirms our observation earlier that the conceptual shift from unidimensional to multidimensional poverty has not had a high impact on the GoI policymakers. Practical aspects also hinder the applicability of the new method as idealized. Once the BPL household list is prepared, it is required that it be displayed at a public place and scrutinized by the local community before finalizing. In how many panchayats in the country will this be done properly remain doubtful<sup>68</sup>.

The criticisms notwithstanding, we see the new BPL methodology as an attempt by GoI to view poverty and identify the poor through a multidimensional lens, off the track from the traditional income or consumption-based approaches.

### *5.7.2 Identification of the Poor by GoK*

In the search for a multidimensional and local-oriented methodology suited to the settings of Kerala, GoK decided to adopt a Risk Index method to identify poor households – henceforth ‘the Kerala method’ – originally developed by United Nations Children’s Fund (UNICEF) with the help of NGOs in the urban area of Alappuzha in 1993 and subsequently applied in the rural area of Malappuram, both in Kerala (Plummer and de Cleene, 1999; Vijayanand, 2001). The method was developed with active community involvement using the participatory approach. At present, GoK uses two slightly different Risk Indices to identify poor households in urban and rural settings (GoK, 2004). We will apply the indicators used in rural areas for this study. Kerala Method to identify the rural poor has nine core indices and eight additional criteria. The core indices relate to housing, water, sanitation, literacy, income sources, food, presence of infants, presence of alcoholics and caste/tribe. The eight additional criteria relate to contextual factors to be taken into account wherever applicable. Presence of four or more of the core indices qualifies the household to be categorized as poor (‘risk family’). Households with eight or all of the indices present are placed in the very poor (‘destitute’) category<sup>69</sup>.

The decentralization programme implemented in the state during late 1990s provided the necessary institutional structures for the applicability of the method. Under the *Kudumbashree* initiative of the SPEM, GoK has been mobilizing rural populace into *ayalkoottangal* (NHGs/SHGs) as we noted earlier. Virtually the whole of rural Kerala has been covered under the programme. Though the initiative began as a women oriented

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<sup>68</sup> After a long legal battle concerning the results of the 2002 BPL census, GoI has decided not to proceed with its implementation, instead a committee has been set up to propose the methodology for the next census in 2007 (Karat, 2006).

<sup>69</sup> See Appendix V-B.

programme, men's groups have also started emerging recently. Identification of the poor, as idealized in the Kerala Method, has to be done through the *ayalkoottungal*. These groups are comprised of households that live in the same neighbourhood and meet on a regular basis. The identification process involves discussion and consensus among participants. Kerala method purports that perfect knowledge of each other ensures transparency in identification of the poor through the neighbourhood groups. However, practical difficulties limit the smooth operationalisation of the process.

## 5.8 Methodology

For this case study, we draw from the field research that we conducted in Kuttanad during 2004-05. Recapitulating, the field research involved a community level study for deriving local meanings of poverty, followed by a survey of selected households.

The community level study involved focus group discussions, informal interviews, observation and triangulation. Local meanings of poverty were derived through structured group discussions. It was explained that the purpose of the study was purely academic, which may or may not benefit the area in future and that the researcher would like to know what the villagers meant by 'being poor' and whom did they consider to be poor and not poor in that community. Notes were taken during the discussion. Notes from all the discussions were eventually compared and the recurring common dimensions identified. However, no prioritisation of the dimensions or ranking of the intensity of variation within each dimension (weighting) was made. The weights were assigned later based on triangulation of information gathered from a number of sources. Firstly, we considered the information available in the field notes. Secondly, we relied on the interviews with household members during the survey. This is elaborated in the next section.

The significant feature of our methodology is the use of 'participatory numbers' (Chambers, 2007b). As we noted in Chapter 4, Section 4.3.1.2, this approach argues that participatory research methods, contrary to conventional wisdom, can generate both qualitative and quantitative data (Mayoux and Chambers, 2005). The key difference is that while traditional qualitative or quantitative data is collected, analysed and used by experts, participatory numbers ensures some level of involvement of the lay people in collection, analysis and/or use of data from community research. As noted above, we relied on local peoples' descriptions ('words') to generate indicators ('numbers') of poverty and vulnerability, thereby following a *basic* participatory numbers approach.

For the survey, we selected 100 households in the village, based on a purposive sample (Bernard, 2002: 182-4) as elaborated in Chapter 4, section 4.3.4. Along with information on key household characteristics, data on the dimensions of poverty in the BPL, Kerala and local methods were also collected during household interviews.

Preliminary analysis involved categorization of households according to the BPL, Kerala and local methods. Subsequently we compared the outcomes from the BPL and the Kerala methods with the local method. BPL method does not have a prior poverty cut-off to categorize households, but only a scoring system as we noted earlier. We ranked the households according to BPL scores. We then compared the BPL scores and ranks with the classification and ranking of households according to the local method. Kerala method, on the other hand, has a poverty cut-off. We categorized households as poor and non-poor accordingly. Then we compared the Kerala categorization with the classification and ranking according to the local method.

We will now describe the local method to identify the poor households in the village that we developed in consultation with the local people.

### **5.9 Peoples' Poverty: Local Method to Identify the Poor**

The initial discussions suggested that 'what you earn' (*varumaanam*) must be the key determinant of poverty. However, probing more revealed the insecurity of the local people for the future, which they associated with different occupations.

'We can stretch from one day to another if we have labour...no problem...but we do not have anything left...we are not sure about what will come next' (an agricultural labourer).

'Agriculture is not at all profitable these days...it is risky...many of us invest every season by borrowing (from money lenders and the banks) and even pawning (women's) jewellery...but nobody can predict...'

'Agriculture is a lottery...worst are the conditions of those who take land on lease and lose everything...' (farmers)

‘Livelihood insecurity’ was thus taken as the key determinant of poverty and the core criterion in identifying poor households. A poor household in the village is one that does not have steady income and a secure means of livelihood. Households were categorized into four groups based on primary means of livelihood of the household head: very poor, poor, non-poor/better-off and secure/well-off.

(a) Very poor: *Theere paavapetta* or *pattini* were the most common terms used to denote the very poor.

The ‘very poor’ are the ‘hungry households’, however, none of the households in the village fit in this category at that time. Local people noted that though many households cut food intake, especially during the monsoon (June-August) when the people are off from work and the school year begins for the children, there is no household that ‘goes hungry’ (*pattini*). However, a few of them remarked that there might be households who are hungry, but even close neighbours may not know it.

‘You cannot say for sure...people are proud (*abhimaanam*)...who will want to tell you that she is hungry (*pattini*)...self-esteem is everything’

In general, the view was that the village and Kuttanad as a whole have undergone much transformation over the past few decades resulting in the elimination of hunger. Previous studies have also noted this (Kannan, 1995). A second crop has been in practise in the village since the early 1980s. Though there is a widely prevalent view that fertility and productivity have declined as a result of this, villagers noted that the second crop provided more labour days for the population, thereby eliminating hunger.

(b) Poor: The terms used to denote the poor were *paavapetta* or less often *onnum kittapporillaatha* and *daridra*.

The ‘poor’ category included agricultural labour households and other labour households in the ascending order. Other labour households included fish workers, construction workers and casual labourers in no particular order. However, agricultural labour households were viewed as the ‘real poor’. As a caveat, it must be noted here that there are few purely agricultural labour households in Kuttanad. As elsewhere, people try to engage in multiple occupations to diversify the sources of income. Many agricultural labour households are farmers as well, often undertaking paddy cultivation in leased land or on the small piece of farmland they own. Nevertheless, the general perception was

that labour in the field is 'dirty'. Older generation did not want their children to take up an agricultural labourer's job. Younger generation would better 'stay unemployed and look for a job' or 'escape to the (Persian) Gulf' than work as an agricultural labourer.

(c) Non-poor/better-off: The terms *paavapettavarallatha*, *saamanyam mechchapetta* or *sthira varumaanakkaar* were used to denote the non-poor/better-off.

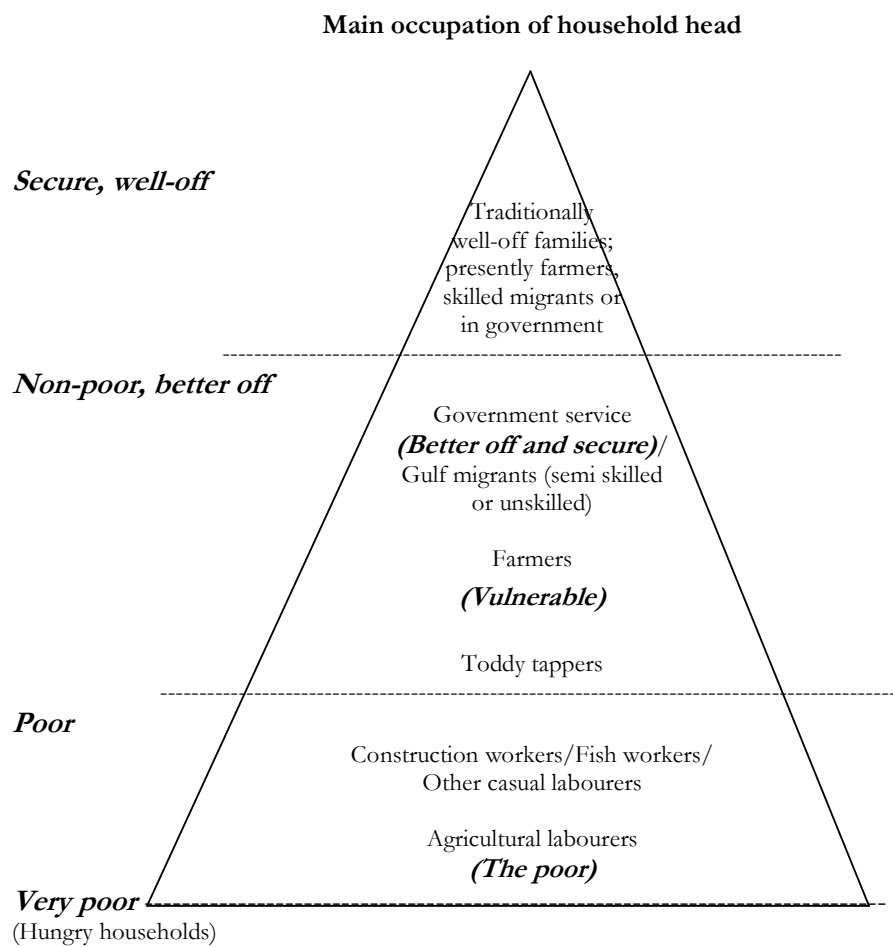
This category included toddy tappers, farmers, Gulf migrants and government employees in the ascending order. Toddy tappers are the traditional local beer brewers belonging to the Ezhava caste (Osella and Osella, 2000). Although labourers, they are non-poor since they are highly organized and have employment round the year. Farmers were viewed as the 'vulnerable non-poor'. Most of them are Syrian Christians and have traditionally been farmers. They are 'vulnerable' for two reasons. Firstly, crop loss or bad harvest can leave the farm household in crisis for at least a few months. Secondly, pride prevents them from taking up lowly occupations or labour elsewhere. Jobs, mostly unskilled, in the Persian Gulf were accorded preference if one fails to get employment in the government or in a steady income earning job. Government employees were considered 'better-off and secure'. The local people viewed that the life of a government employee is the most secure. Many wanted to see either them or their children placed in some position in the government.

(d) Secure/well-off: The term *mechchapetta* was used to denote the secure/well-off.

'Secure/well-off' are the few wealthy households, including traditionally rich families. They are presently farmers, skilled migrants, business people or in the government. Though many of the erstwhile landlords have declined in wealth, their descendants are still well-off relative to the wider community. A common practice among them is to keep the farmland fallow or lease it out to small farmers or agricultural labourers.

Though such a general categorization may not reveal why *a particular household* is poor or not, as standard participatory methods like wealth ranking do, it is nevertheless indicative. Figure 5.1 illustrates the core criterion of poverty in the village and the different categories.

Figure 5.1 Core Criterion of 'Local' Poverty





In addition to the core criterion, namely, means of livelihood, local people identified certain ‘vulnerability indicators’. Presence of one or more of these indicators, they described, will make a poor household more poor and precarious. The vulnerability indicators identified thus are:

- (a) Only one income earner
- (b) Man unable to work
- (c) Headed by female
- (d) Dilapidated/badly constructed house
- (e) Has had marriage(s) in the recent past or has girl(s) of ‘marriageable age’
- (f) Has children pursuing higher education
- (g) Has not taken farmland on lease in the recent past, and,
- (h) Living inside paddy field

We assigned weights to each of these indicators, through a process of triangulation of evidence collected during fieldwork, as mentioned in the previous section. As marriage, illness and poor housing were mentioned as prominent factors in ill-being, we decided to give more weight to indicators related to these. Though expenditure on higher education was considered an equally severe burden on the household, we assigned less weight to it, since it is an investment for the future. Not having taken farmland on lease and having to live inside the paddy field were cited as indicators of ill-being, though much less importantly. Hence, we assigned low weight to them. The composite of the points of each indicator gives the ‘vulnerability score’ of a poor household, which we used to rank the households. The higher the score, the higher is the vulnerability of a household. It must be mentioned here that the process of assigning weights was done at the ‘expert’ (here, the researchers) level and did not involve the villagers. As such our approach could be termed, as we noted before, a *basic* participatory numbers approach.

The Local Method to identify the poor is summarized in Table 5.2.

Table 5.2 Local Method to Identify the Poor

<b>Level I – Core criterion</b> To categorize <i>all</i> households	Primary occupation of the household head	
	Has only one income earner	(0, 1) (no, yes)
	Man unable to work	(0, 1) (no, yes)
	Headed by female	(0, 1, 2) (no, yes, ill female)
<b>Level II – Vulnerability indicators</b> To score and rank <i>poor</i> households	Has dilapidated/badly constructed house	(0, 1, 2) (good, bad, very bad)
	Has had marriage(s) in recent past or has girl(s) of marriable age	(0, 1, 2, 3...) (none, one, two, three...)
	Has children pursuing higher education	(0, 0.5, 1, 1.5, 2...) (none, one, two, three...)
	Has taken farmland on lease in the recent past	(0, 0.5) (yes, no)
	Lives inside paddy field	(0, 0.5) (no, yes)

## 5.10 Policymakers' Poverty vis-à-vis Peoples' Poverty

Among the 100 households in our sample, there were sixty-three poor, thirty-four non-poor and three well-off households according to the local method. We will take a look now at how the BPL method and the Kerala method identify the poor vis-à-vis the local method.

### 5.10.1 Local Method vis-à-vis the BPL Method

The higher the BPL score, the better off is the household and vice versa. In the lower end of BPL, between BPL scores sixteen and twenty-seven, there are twenty-six poor households and no non-poor household according to the local method. In the upper end

of BPL, between BPL scores thirty-eight and forty-six, there are twenty-one households non-poor according to the local method, including the three well-off, but no poor household (see Table 5.3). This shows that the BPL method identifies those households that are really better-off and really worse-off, according to the local method. However, there are fifty-three households between BPL scores twenty-eight and thirty-seven. The degree of convergence or divergence in this category is indeterminable due to lack of comparability between the two methods. Table 5.3 also shows a cross-tabulation of these households.

*Table 5.3: Local Method vis-à-vis the BPL Method*

<b>BPL score</b>	<b>Local category</b>		<b>Total</b>
	<i>Poor</i>	<i>Non-poor</i>	
<i>0-15</i>	0	0	0
<i>16-27</i>	26	0	26
<i>28</i>	7	1	8
<i>29</i>	5	0	5
<i>30</i>	7	2	9
<i>31</i>	5	1	6
<i>32</i>	3	1	4
<i>33</i>	3	0	3
<i>34</i>	3	3	6
<i>35</i>	1	2	3
<i>36</i>	1	3	4
<i>37</i>	2	3	5
<i>38-46</i>	0	21	21
<i>47-52</i>	0	0	0
<b>Total</b>	63	37	100

The higher the vulnerability score, the more precarious is a poor household in the local method. The lower the BPL score, the worse-off is a household according to the BPL method. Taking the sixty-three poor households according to the local method, we find a negative correlation between vulnerability scores and BPL scores ( $r = -0.58$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). This suggests that a household classified as poor in the local method would be classified so in the BPL method as well, showing high convergence between the two methods.

The results, in general, point to a convergence between the BPL and the local methods in identifying the poor. Both the methods screen out the households at the extremes (the really better-off and the really worse-off) in a similar fashion. Furthermore, we also found a similar pattern in classifying the poor households using the local vulnerability scores and the BPL scores.

#### *5.10.2 Local Method vis-à-vis the Kerala Method*

Both the Kerala method and local method do not find a very poor household in the village. The Kerala method does not have a categorization among the non-poor, whereas the local method divides them into better-off and well-off and places three households in the latter category.

The Kerala method and the local method diverge greatly in dividing the households between poor and non-poor. While the former finds only twenty-eight poor and seventy-two non-poor households in the sample, the latter does almost the opposite, finding sixty-three poor and thirty-seven non-poor. Furthermore, one household non-poor in the local method is classified as poor in the Kerala method (see Table 5.4). However, we also find that high vulnerability scores are associated with being categorized as poor in the Kerala method as well. A cross-tabulation between vulnerability scores of the sixty-three poor households in the local method and the categorization according to the Kerala method is also shown in Table 5.4.

The results suggest a mix of divergence as well as convergence between the Kerala and the local methods in identifying the poor. The Kerala method found much less poor in the village than the local method. However, the vulnerable among the poor as identified by the local method have been classified as poor in the Kerala method as well, pointing to some overlap.

Table 5.4: Local Method vis-à-vis the Kerala Method

		Kerala Method		Total
		Poor	Non-Poor	
Non-Poor		1	36	37
Poor (Vulnerability score)	0.0	0	9	9
	0.5	2	4	6
	1.0	1	9	10
	1.5	3	7	10
	2.0	2	3	5
	2.5	6	3	9
	3.0	3	0	3
	3.5	3	1	4
	4.0	2	0	2
	4.5	1	0	1
	5.0	3	0	3
	5.5	1	0	1
Total		28	72	100

### 5.10.3 Cases of Convergence and Divergence

In this section, we will take up some specific cases of convergence and divergence between the BPL, Kerala and local methods in identifying the poor households.

#### 5.10.3.1 Convergence

(a) *The poorest households*: Except for slight differences in ranking, the BPL and the Kerala methods identify the poorest households similar to the local method. We will illustrate this taking the case of households A and B.

Household A with vulnerability score of 5.5 is the poorest household in the village according to the local method. The Kerala method also considers this household as poor. This household has a BPL score of twenty, which places it at the fourth position among the poorest according to the BPL method. However, household B is the poorest according to BPL method with a score of sixteen. This household has a vulnerability score of 4.5. The Kerala method considers it as poor. Apart from this household, two households with scores eighteen and nineteen fall below and another with score twenty equals household A in the BPL method.

Households A and B both are agricultural labour households, with no farmland and living in shabby huts, with minimum physical amenities. Heads of both households have been ill for sometime and working inconsistently. However, household A has two children, including a daughter of marriable age, studying for professional nursing diploma, whereas household B has only younger children still in school. Household A has taken a hefty education loan from the bank for which the local NGO has acted as liaison and support<sup>70</sup>.

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<sup>70</sup> Even poor households in Kerala invest large amounts of money for higher education of their children, anticipating future returns. The recent directives of the government liberalizing the eligibility conditions have made the process of receiving loans easier. Many households in the study village had borrowed from banks as well as from informal sources for professional nursing education. The burgeoning demand for nurses in Europe, articulated well by popular media, as well as the visible economic success of migrant nurses contribute to the perception of this investment being worthwhile. Our finding contradicts what Wood (2003) calls the 'Faustian Bargain' that leaves the poor to discount the future, make no long-term investment and live 'securely' in the present, with the little they have. Having defined poverty as 'being livelihood insecure', it is interesting to see that many of these 'insecure' households are willing to take high risks expecting a return in future.

The presence of a girl of marriable age and two children pursuing higher education makes household A more vulnerable in the perception of the local people. On the other hand, high literacy status (indicator seven), borrowing from institutional sources (indicator eleven) and migration for purposes other than livelihood (indicator twelve) together contribute four points more in the BPL method for this household compared to household B.

(b) *The richest households*: Three households in our sample have each a BPL score of forty-six. These are the secure and well-off households according to the local method. Kerala method also classifies them as non-poor. These are not the richest households in the village, but fit perfectly well in the highest category in the local method. All are Syrian Christian households, traditionally farmers, but of late leasing out the land since agriculture is not profitable enough. Two households have educated and skilled migrants in the Persian Gulf and the head as well as his wife in the third household have retired from the government and invested in small businesses.

#### 5.10.3.2 Divergence

(a) *A notable deviation*: Household C is the only non-poor household according to the local method classified as poor by the Kerala method. It has a BPL score of thirty-eight. The occupation of the head of the household, a medium scale farmer, places it among the non-poor according to the local method. However, the presence of four factors, namely, living inside the paddy field, having a child below five years, absence of toilet and lack of access to safe drinking water makes it poor in the Kerala method. The high education of the wife of the household head, up to the bachelor's level, contributes among other factors, to the high BPL score.

(b) *Gender*: Local people tend to give more importance to gender. Of the eight vulnerability indicators listed for poor households, three (man unable to work, headed by female and marriage) concern the relative deprivation of women. The Kerala method, on the other hand, accords lesser significance to it with no gender-related indicator among the nine risk factors and three among the contextual factors. Apart from giving some weight to female labour (indicator eight), the BPL method attributes no priority to gender differences.

Many participants in our discussions described having a girl in the household as a 'life long burden'. The household has to start saving money and assets years before marriage. Yet, marriage and payment of dowry leaves it in debt for a few years, in addition to taking away a chunk of their assets. Also 'the burden' does not end with marriage. The woman's household has to bear the expenses of the delivery of the children as well as the traditional ceremonies associated with it, which differs across religions and castes.

## **5.11 Discussion**

This section discusses the conceptual issues raised by the study and provides a comparative assessment of the three methods.

### *5.11.1 Conceptualizing Poverty as Livelihood Insecurity*

The study shows that the local people conceptualise poverty in terms of livelihood insecurity. Prior research has also emphasized that insecurity forms a key element in creating and perpetuating poverty (World Bank, 2000). In fact, livelihood insecurity has been recognized as a central theme in poverty research and rural development during recent times (Devereux, 2001). Our study reaffirms this point.

What is striking, however, is that the local people associate different levels of in/security with different occupations. As such, some occupations are exclusively categorized as insecure and hence poor. A number of indicators of vulnerability have also been pointed out indicating the limited ability of poor people to face stresses and shocks.

The results suggest that poor households in the region need not necessarily be unemployed, but 'insecurely employed'. Illness, for example, can leave an agricultural labour household without income for a while, even while there exists an opportunity to work. The non-poor, on the other hand, are 'normally' not poor, but vulnerable. Crop loss, for example, can leave a farmer household in transient poverty (Hulme, 2003). As such, a peon's (lowest level government employee) job is more secure than an agricultural labourer's or a small farmer's, though a peon in Kerala obtains a monthly income less, on average, than a farmer (KSSP, 2006: 65). The peon obtains periodic hikes, but never a slash, in salary and upon retirement, receives a pension. The government takes care, partly, of the health risk. Moreover, in the eventuality of death during service, the closest family member is entitled to receive a job in the government. In the case of an agricultural labourer and a farmer, we see that the former invests less



and earns less whereas the latter invests more, but runs the risk of losing more. However, for both, the security of their livelihood depends on the success of the crop, which is unpredictable. Depending on their respective capabilities and assets, a peon, a farmer and an agricultural labour could all prepare for a foreseeable stress (marriage or education expense), but the probability of a peon's household surviving an unforeseeable shock (illness or death) is more than that of the other two.

The key point is that whereas poor people lack the ability to cope with crisis, the vulnerable non-poor has limited resilience to adversities. This is what ultimately makes the difference in their lives. Poverty reduction must, hence, go beyond ensuring food security and providing a means of living. It must aim at enhancing the capacity of poor and vulnerable households to cope with and recover from shocks and stresses. In summary, our study points to the need to create 'sustainable livelihoods' (Scoones, 1998).

#### *5.11.2 A comparative Assessment of the Three Methods*

The BPL method emphasizes basic needs (food, clothing, housing and toilet), assets (land, consumer durables and debt), capabilities (literacy and school attendance of children) and livelihood (labour status, means of livelihood and migration). However, the approach is top-down with experts choosing the indicators and weights, with no involvement of the lay people or the target group. The BPL method assigns equal weight to the thirteen indicators relative to the other and progressive weight to severity within each indicator, thus arriving at a final single score for the household.

The Kerala method, in addition to basic needs (food, water, housing and toilet) and capabilities (literacy), emphasizes socio-cultural (caste) and local factors. The Kerala method takes a bottom-up approach, through participatory poverty assessments (PPAs), involving the target groups. However, even while the local communities were consulted during the design of the method to select the indicators, they were not involved in the process of assigning weights. The Kerala method attributes equal weight to the different indicators, relative to the other as well as for severity within each, to screen-off the non-poor households.

The local method emphasizes one predominant dimension of poverty, viz., livelihood insecurity, and assigns relative importance to different means of livelihood. It identifies a host of vulnerability indicators for the poor and through differential weighting, stresses the severity of each indicator relative to the other. Though it was eventually the researchers who assigned the weights to the indicators, the process involved triangulation of evidence gathered from a number of local sources. The approach was open-ended and

bottom-up, in line with the participatory tradition, resulting in quantifiable indicators. Methodologically, we have adopted what may be called a *basic* participatory numbers approach (Mayoux and Chambers, 2005).

Table 5.5 summarizes a comparative assessment of the three methods.

*Table 5.5: The Three Methods – A Comparative Assessment*

Method	<i>BPL</i>	<i>Kerala</i>	<i>Local</i>
<b>Developed by</b>	Experts	Experts and NGOs (as PPA facilitators) in consultation with local people	Researchers (as PPA facilitators) in consultation with local people
<b>Level</b>	Macro	Meso	Micro
<b>Actors</b>	GoI	GoK	Local people
<b>Approach</b>	Multidimensional: Combination of basic needs, assets, capabilities and livelihood	Multidimensional: Combination of basic needs, capabilities, social exclusion and adaptable local/contextual factors	Multidimensional: One predominant dimension of poverty (livelihood insecurity), but many dimensions of vulnerability inside poverty
<b>Weighting system</b>	No 'local' involvement: Equal weight relative to other indicators and progressive weight to severity within each indicator	No 'local' involvement: Equal weight relative to other indicators and to severity within each indicator	Partial 'local' involvement: Prioritizations on core poverty criterion, differential weight to vulnerability indicators
<b>Intended universality</b>	High (national)	Medium (regional)	Low (local)
<b>Objectivity</b>	High	High	High
<b>Poverty line</b>	No	Yes	Yes
<b>Unit of analysis</b>	Household	Household	Household
<b>Time-frame</b>	Current picture	Current picture	Past, current and future events (e.g. marriage)

Revisiting the results, we see a general convergence of the BPL and the Kerala methods with the local method. In addition to the operational issues like choice of dimensions and weighting, we could attribute the results to two conceptual factors. Firstly, similar to the local method, the BPL method draws largely from the livelihoods framework. Three indicators in the latter, viz., labour status, means of livelihood and migration, relate directly to livelihood and are assigned progressive weight just as the former. This could presumably be intuitive based on expert knowledge created through familiarity with poverty research in India and elsewhere. Secondly, the local method treats poverty and vulnerability as two interrelated but overlapping concepts (Dercon, 2005: 25). It implies that the non-poor can be vulnerable too. Farmers have been pointed out as the vulnerable non-poor in the local method whereas a host of indicators account for the vulnerability among the poor. Although the BPL and the Kerala methods do not make a distinction between poverty and vulnerability, many of the vulnerability indicators that the local method uses are similar to what the Kerala method also applies to identify the poor. Hence, the vulnerable poor according to the local method are identified, in general, as poor in the Kerala method as well.

The primary objective of this study, as we noted at the outset, was not to devise a method, but to compare and contrast the views on poverty of the policymakers and the poor people. The ‘method’, in fact, evolved during the course of the study and we saw it as an appropriate mechanism to facilitate numerical comparison with the existing methods of the national and the state governments. As such, it was a means to an end, than the end itself. Thus, the key contribution of this study is not the development of a new method *per se*, but in illustrating firstly, the conceptual point that local/contextual dimensions need to be taken into account while approaching poverty, and secondly, the methodological point that relevant and useful ‘numbers’ (quantitative data) could be derived from ‘words’ (qualitative data). ‘Numbers’ facilitate comparison and are more appealing to the policymakers.

## 5.12 Policy Implications

The case study brought forth key contextual and cultural elements in poverty that have to be addressed to target poor households effectively. Comparable recent studies elsewhere have also taken a similar view (Krishna, 2004; 2006). Locally informed programmes and methods combine the ‘life knowledge’ (Krumer-Nevo, 2005) of the people who experience poverty and vulnerability in their lives with expert knowledge. The design of these would involve close collaboration between researchers, NGOs and the local governments, in addition to popular participation. Experience has shown that participatory methods cost less compared to questionnaire surveys (Hulme, 2000: 89-90, Krishna, 2004:132). Local views and concerns can be effectively incorporated in policies and acted upon given the existence of strong decentralized governments. Improvement or deterioration over time could be tracked by periodic monitoring of the local indicators.

A key finding of this study is the uncertainty that looms over the lives of the lay people. The poor can be targeted once they are identified, but poverty can be reduced only when policies aim at its causes. Poverty reduction policies must help the poor to climb up from poverty as well as protect the non-poor from falling into it. As Gaiha and Imai’s (2004) empirical work shows, it is more difficult to identify the vulnerable among the non-poor, like the farmers in our case study, and protect them, than target the poor.

The lay people do have their own coping mechanisms, like borrowing or putting in extra labour, to provide for uncertain events. However, this often has negative consequences such as borrowing leading to debt or additional labour leading to physical exhaustion. Two possible options for risk mitigation at the micro-level are, firstly, to strengthen group-based self-help initiatives and secondly, to create effective insurance schemes. However, self-help initiatives such as collective farming or microcredit have their limitations. For example, in the case of aggregate risks like a flood, common in our study area, the whole community will be unable to provide for itself. On the other hand, effective insurance schemes can cover idiosyncratic as well as aggregate risks to a large extent. As such, crop insurance should be provided for the farmers and health insurance for the labourers<sup>71</sup>. The recent National Rural Employment Guarantee Scheme

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<sup>71</sup> GoK did, in fact, design a health insurance scheme aimed at BPL households, made effective through a government order, in 2006. According to the scheme, a five-member BPL household could access healthcare and accident claim for a premium amount of Rs. 399 per annum. However, the beneficiaries need to contribute only as low as thirty-three rupees, the remaining to be borne by subsidies from GoI and GoK. The proposed benefits included Rs. 30,000 per annum for medical expenses, up to Rs. 60,000 per annum for treatment at home, if required, up to Rs. 15,000 per annum for maternity needs, a subsistence

(NREGS)<sup>72</sup>, that guarantees work for rural households, is a firm step towards poverty reduction in India. However, it does not necessarily remove the uncertainties that they face. NREGS must be supplemented by effective risk mitigation strategies, like the ones we suggested above, to make the efforts at poverty reduction more meaningful.

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allowance of Rs. 50 per day, if the bread-winner is hospitalized, a bystander allowance of Rs. 50 per day and cashless medical treatment on production of the photo identity cards supplied by the insurer, a private company. The scheme also included an accident insurance benefit of Rs. one lakh (100,000) for death or full disability and Rs. 50,000 for partial disability. It was also decided that the identification of the beneficiaries will be done through the *Kudumbashree* groups and that the scheme will be implemented through SPEM and the local governments. However, the new government that came to power in 2006 scrapped the scheme alleging irregularities on the part of the previous government during bidding favoring a private insurance company, instead of a public company. For details, see <http://flonnet.com/fl2322/stories/20061117001305000.htm> (*Frontline*, November 2006; accessed on 23.05.2007).

<sup>72</sup> <http://nrega.nic.in/> (Official website of the programme; accessed on 29.11.2008).

## Appendix V-A

### BPL Census 2002 Schedule<sup>73</sup>

No.	Characteristic	Scores				
		0	1	2	3	4
1	Size group of operational holding of land	Nil	Less than 1 ha. of un-irrigated land (or less than 0.5 ha. of irrigated land)	1-2 ha. of un-irrigated land (or 0.5-1.0 ha. of irrigated land)	2-5 ha. of un-irrigated land (or 1.0-2.5 ha. of irrigated land)	More than 5 ha. of un-irrigated land (or 2.5 ha. Of irrigated land)
2	Type of house	Houseless	Kutchra	Semi-pucca	Pucca	Urban type
3	Average availability of normal wear clothing (per person in pieces)	Less than 2	2 or more, but less than 4	4 or more, but less than 6	6 or more, but less than 10	10 or more
4	Food security	Less than one square meal per day for major part of the year	Normally, one square meal per day, but less than one square meal occasionally	One square meal per day throughout the year	Two square meals per day, with occasional shortage	Enough food throughout the year
5	Sanitation	Open defecation	Group latrine with irregular water supply	Group latrine with regular water supply	Clean group latrine with regular water supply and regular sweeper	Private latrine
6	Ownership of consumer durables:  Do you own (tick (✓)) -TV -Electric fan -Kitchen appliances like pressure cooker -Radio	Nil	Any one	Two items only	Any three at all items	All items and/ or ownership of any one of the following: -Computer -Telephone -Refrigerator -Colour TV -Electric kitchen appliances -Expensive furniture -LMV/LCV -Tractor -Mechanized 2 wheeler/ 3 wheeler -Power tiller -Combined thresher/ harvester [4 wheeled mechanized vehicle]
7	Literacy status of the highest literate adult	Illiterate	Up to primary (Class V)	Completed secondary (Passed Class X)	Graduate/ professional diploma	Post graduate/ professional graduate

<sup>73</sup> Source: Sundaram (2003).

8	Status of the household labour force	Bonded labour	Female & child labour	Only adult females & no child labour	Adult males only	Others
9	Means of livelihood	Casual labour	Subsistence cultivation	Artisan	Salary	Others
10	Status of children (5-14 years (any child)	Not going to school and working	Going to school and working			Going to school and not working
11	Type of indebtedness	For daily consumption purposes from informal sources	For production purpose from informal sources	For other purpose from informal sources	Borrowing only from institutional agencies	No indebtedness and possess assets
12	Reasons for migration from household	Casual work	Seasonal employment	Other forms of livelihood	Non-migrant	Other purposes
13	Preference of assistance	Wage employment/ TPDS (Targeted Public Distribution System)	Self employment	Training and skill up gradation	Housing	Loan/ subsidy more than Rs. 1 lakhs or no assistance needed.

## Appendix V-B

### Kerala (*Kudumbashree*) Method to Identify Poor and Destitute Households<sup>74</sup>

The BPL households are identified using the following 'risk factors' developed by the SPEM:

1. Living in a Kutcha house
2. No access to safe drinking water
3. No access to sanitary latrine
4. Illiterate adult in the household
5. Not more than one earning member
6. Taking barely two meals a day or less
7. Children below the age of 5 in the household
8. Alcoholic or drug addict in the household
9. Scheduled Caste/Scheduled Tribe household

SPEM considers household with four or more of these factors present as 'risk family' and eight or all of the factors present as 'destitute'. "To have a more precise identification...", the following factors have also to be taken into consideration, "...in addition to..." the nine 'risk factors', in rural areas:

1. No landed property to put up the dwelling place (living in *puramboke* land, forest land, side bunds of canal, paddy fields etc.)
2. Spending nights in public places, streets, verandas of shops etc.
3. Headed by unwed mothers, single parent or separated women living in distress
4. Headed by poor young widows or having women who have passed the age of marriage, but remaining unmarried
5. Having members subjected to severe, chronic and incurable diseases or physically and mentally challenged
6. No healthy member/breadwinner
7. Begging for livelihood
8. Having women subjected to atrocities

In urban areas, a different set of additional factors has to be taken into account, namely:

1. Spending nights in public places, streets, verandas of shops etc.
2. Headed by poor young widows or having women who have passed the age of marriage, but remained unmarried
3. Begging for livelihood
4. No healthy breadwinner below age 60
5. Having women subjected to atrocities
6. Having street children or children in Juvenile Home/Poor Home
7. Having children below age 14 who work to earn money for the household
8. Having commercial sex workers
9. Having women living in *Abala Mandiram*
10. Living in slums

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<sup>74</sup> Source: GoK (2004) p. 327-328.



## VI

### HOUSEHOLD RESPONSES TO STRESSES AND SHOCKS<sup>75</sup>

#### 6.1 Vulnerability, Coping and Social Capital

In the backdrop of the popularisation of social capital, it has become fashionable in development circles to highlight the resilience of the poor in the midst of stresses and shocks as well as their resourcefulness. Expressing scepticism, we argue that social capital is a ‘conditional’ resource for the poor, availability of which is dependant on the presence of a ‘critical mass’ of other resources. The State plays a pivotal role in creating this ‘critical mass’. Household level case studies from our fieldwork, on how the poor cope with vulnerable situations, are used to illustrate this point.

The vulnerable conditions in which rural households, especially the poor, in developing societies live have been well documented in the extant literature (Devereux, 2001). In the absence of adequate insurance or safety nets, idiosyncratic risks such as illness or common risks like crop failure can leave them in precarious conditions (Dercon, 2002)<sup>76</sup>. Whereas poverty may denote lack or deficiency, such as not having income equal to the poverty line, vulnerability signifies insecurity. It is defencelessness against or susceptibility to risk, stresses and shocks (Chambers, 1989: 1)<sup>77</sup>. In the studies on poverty and vulnerability, a ‘stress’ is generally taken to mean ‘a predictable adverse event’ and a ‘shock’, ‘an unpredictable adverse event’. Scoones (1998: 6-7), for instance, refers to stresses and shocks as the ‘disturbing forces’ that threaten the sustainability of the natural base on which most rural livelihoods depend upon. Coping refers to the mechanisms that the households employ while encountering such stresses and shocks (Ellis, 2006). The activities such as savings, building up assets, delaying farming in times of uncertain

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<sup>75</sup> This chapter is based on a paper, Thomas, B.K, R. Muradian, G. de Groot and A. de Ruijter (October 2008) ‘Resilient and Resourceful? A Case Study on How the Poor Cope in Kerala, India’, forthcoming in *Journal of Asian and African Studies*. The draft version of the paper was presented at the annual Chaire Quetelet (Theme for 2007: ‘Poverty Dynamics and Vulnerability: Measures and Explanations in Demography and Social Sciences’) at Louvain-la-Neuve (27-30 November 2007).

<sup>76</sup> Distinction is drawn in the literature between idiosyncratic and common risks. While the former affects only a particular individual, the latter has aggregate impact affecting all members of a community. However, as Dercon (2002, p. 143) notes, ‘in practice, even within well-defined rural communities, few risks are purely common or idiosyncratic’.

<sup>77</sup> Though Chambers’s (1989, p. 1) definition has been influential in poverty literature, vulnerability is a concept that lacks a clear definition and has been used in different ways in different disciplines such as economics (Morduch, 1994), sociology/anthropology (Bebbington, 1999), food security/nutrition studies (Maxwell et al, 1999), disaster management (Few, 2003) and environmental studies (Yamin et al, 2005).

weather and diversification of livelihood, which are done in anticipation of stresses and shocks are referred to as *ex-ante* coping strategies. These are contrasted with *ex-post* coping strategies like borrowing, selling assets and reducing the number of meals, which are taken after the occurrence of stresses and shocks (Corbett, 1988; Morduch, 1995; Ellis, 1998).

In the 1990s, the literature on poverty and vulnerability has tended to focus on the resilience and the resourcefulness of the poor in the midst of stresses and shocks. Moser (1998: 5), while elaborating the 'asset vulnerability framework', notes that '...the poor are strategic managers of complex asset portfolios'. The growing popularity of social capital put impetus on such views. Loosely defined as networks and relations, social capital gained currency after Putnam who formalized it as '...features of social organization such as networks, norms and social trust that facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit' (Putnam, 1995, p. 67). The concept forms one of the core elements of the popular tools to study vulnerability such as the sustainable livelihoods approach (Scoones, 1998).

It was largely the efforts of The World Bank, through its 'Social Capital Initiative', that brought that the concept into mainstream development (Bebbington et al, 2004, World Bank, 1998). This enthusiastic view argued that social capital was 'the missing link' in development (Grootaert, 1998) that would help the poor face vulnerable conditions by 'bonding' (relying on family and friendship networks), 'bridging' (associating with people from dissimilar backgrounds) and 'linking' (tying up with people in authority) (Grootaert et al, 2004: 4, Woolcock and Narayan, 2000).

Such upbeat views have, however, been highly disputed, conceptually as well as empirically. Fine (1999) views the popularization of social capital by The World Bank as part of a 'Post-Washington consensus', aimed at the replacement of the old state versus market agenda, yet not implying a return to the developmental state. At a more applied level, several commentators have highlighted issues that matter in poverty reduction such as power, gender and agency. Optimistic claims on social capital often overlook the issues related to power, as Beall (1997) show using case studies on community involvement in solid waste management in South Asia. Oyen (2002) argues that neither does the poor have the same sort of networks as the non-poor, nor are they allowed to enter into these. Illustrating the Latin American context, Molyneux (2002: 180) notes that though women form the key target group of many social capital oriented poverty reduction programmes such as microfinance, '...the social relations in and through which social capital is reproduced are rarely analyzed...'. Considerable differences exist between men's and women's networks and since power relations in societies are reflected

in and reproduced through social networks, women often find themselves in a disadvantageous position.

Development policies that aim at building social capital with a view that it can be readily used or substituted for other ‘capitals’ (human, economic) have been questioned. Based on field research in Tanzania, Cleaver (2005: 904) shows that the poor ‘...are both more dependant on their ability to exercise agency than others, and less able to do so...’ pointing to the need to focus on ‘...the effects of the lack of material and physical assets of the poor, and to the sociostructural constraints that impede their exercise of agency’. Critics have argued that the emphasis on social capital limits the politico-emancipatory potential of policies by focusing too much on the individual (Schuurman, 2003). Reading in the context of State withdrawal, this would imply that the poor themselves are to be blamed for their inability to cope with vulnerable conditions. Since they could not capitalize on networks and relations, they failed, where in fact, as we discussed above, the living worlds of the poor seriously limit their exercise of agency. Related to this is the recent observation by Gonzalez de la Rocha (2007), drawing on long-term fieldwork, that a ‘myth of survival’ has been created, glorifying the capabilities of the poor to cope with stresses and shocks on their own by relying on their capacity to work and mutual support networks.

## 6.2 Objective and Methodology

It is in the backdrop of this scepticism regarding the resilience and the resourcefulness of the poor that we have framed this chapter. Drawing from our fieldwork we seek answers to the questions, when, how and to what extent do the households’ own resources (economic, human and social capital) as well as the institutions (government and non-governmental) help them cope. We suggest that, for the poor, social capital is largely a ‘conditional resource’; conditional upon the presence of other ‘capitals’, viz., economic and human. As we shall argue, viewing social capital as a ‘conditional resource’ helps us in understanding not just its constraints, but possibilities as well.

We rely on household level case studies<sup>78</sup> to illustrate the process and the dynamics of coping during major stresses (predictable adverse events) and shocks (unpredictable adverse events). Specifically, we will examine four events, two each related to stresses and shocks. These have been derived from the eight local indicators of vulnerability

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<sup>78</sup> The decision to adopt a qualitative approach in this chapter was prompted by two factors. Firstly, the small sample size limited the quantitative data available. Secondly, the available quantitative data focuses on the *major* strategies as reported by the households, which can cloud information on multiple sources and strategies. For instance, many of the poor households in the sample may have used own labour in house construction. However, only three reported it as a major strategy.

mentioned in Chapter 5, section 5.9. As such, construction of a new house (indicator ‘d’) and marriage of the daughter (indicator ‘e’) represent stresses and incapacitating illness (indicators ‘a’ and ‘b’) and death (indicators ‘b’ and ‘c’) of the male income earner represent shocks<sup>79</sup>. The households that we have chosen are coping poor, with varying degrees of vulnerability, but not chronic poor. As such, none represents a failed case, but having experienced stress/shock in the past five to ten years, each case study vividly shows how the households cope, preventing themselves sliding into chronic poverty.

The remaining part of the chapter is organized as follows. Household level case studies on how the poor cope with stresses and shocks are presented in the next section. The role of various resources in coping, especially the constraints and the possibilities of social capital, is discussed before concluding.

### 6.3 Coping With Stresses

#### 6.3.1 Construction of a New House

The major strategies adopted by the poor households in the sample for house construction included using small savings, pawning jewellery, taking loan on land, receiving assistance from the government, borrowing as well as financial help from relatives, neighbours or friends and relying on own labour. One of them reported having received the house as a free gift from an affluent local leader and another, from a church based organisation. Case A illustrates how a poor household manages the building of a new house.

#### Case A

Respondent A (male aged 54), an agricultural labourer, resides in the most deprived area of the village. He has built a two-room house recently. It is yet to be plastered and has brick walls, asbestos roof and cement floor. Since the household belonged to the BPL category, it had received assistance from the government. In addition, Respondent A had also borrowed money from several people. He reported having spent 46 days in building the house. He said he required only 13 sessions (*thachchu*) of labour from outside. His son, a construction labourer aged 28, could manage the building of the foundation of the house. A friend of his son assisted as an unpaid worker (The son helps his friend’s family in times of need – death of father, marriage of sister). The total cost came to around

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<sup>79</sup> Though an investment for the future, household having children pursuing higher education (indicator ‘f’) is a major stress in the short run. However, data limitations did not permit us to examine it in-depth. Not having taken farmland on lease (indicator ‘g’) and having to live inside the paddy field (indicator ‘h’) were cited as indicators of ill-being during fieldwork, but much less importantly.

70,000 Indian rupees (roughly 1600 US dollars at the time of study) of which 28,000 rupees came as governmental assistance and the remaining as savings and borrowings. Since he is healthy and working, he is hopeful of repaying the debt in a few years.

For the poor, a house may mean much more than a shelter. As Moser (1998) argues, drawing from large multi-country field research, housing is a 'less familiar productive asset' for the poor, vis-à-vis labour and other well-known assets. Housing, going beyond ensuing well-being, generates income through renting rooms, providing space for home-based production etc. (Moser, 1998: 4). In this study, housing appears as a 'less familiar vulnerability indicator'. Putting it positively, in our context, a good house can be the basis to claim resources, or a 'better deal' from others. Consider the following instance:

Respondent P<sup>80</sup>, non-poor according to the local definition of poverty, owns a house that is rather large and well constructed, though old. It was being renovated and painted at the time of the interview. She said: 'The marriage<sup>81</sup> of our daughter is more or less fixed. We should appear good to the groom and his family.'

While this is true of the better off, even for the poor, having a house on their own signifies much more than mere possession of economic capital. A common remark during our field study was, 'When you have a good house, people know that you are doing well'. Someone who is doing well, in turn, is in a better position to capitalise on other resources, especially networks and relations (social capital), as we shall argue later.

### *6.3.2 Marriage of the Daughter*

Marriage is a case in point of how culture entangles with development (Rao and Walton, 2004). It is another 'less familiar vulnerability indicator', with contextual relevance, though more acknowledged than housing. For example, studies have shown that even in the states of Kerala and Tamil Nadu in India, which exhibit high human development, dowry and wedding expenses have placed many households in vulnerable conditions (Srinivasan, 2005). Much of the discussions in our focus groups and household interviews had centered on marriage and bringing up a girl. Costs associated with marriage (wedding, dowry) and subsequent events (birth of the first child) are very high, almost all of which has to be borne by the household of the woman.

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<sup>80</sup> Throughout this chapter, the exact identities of the locations and the names of the people have been withheld to protect anonymity.

<sup>81</sup> Marriage is an event of great significance in our field context, which we shall discuss shortly.

Savings in cash and jewellery, borrowing from relatives, friends or neighbours, financial help from relatives and monetary gifts from well-off people and community groups were the major strategies adopted by the poor households in the sample for the marriage of a daughter. One of the poor households also reported sale of land to 'marry off' the daughter. Case B is illustrative.

### Case B

Respondent B (female aged 53), an agricultural labourer, lives in the remote part of the village. Her husband died 15 years back and she stays with her unmarried son, aged 30, a construction labourer. Her daughter, aged 28 at the time of the interview, was married off two years back in 2002. 'It was a difficult time', she said. Her *kutchda*<sup>82</sup> dwelling crumbled down in the flood of 2001. The daughter had already 'gone past the marriable age'<sup>83</sup>. She gave an application for a new house in the *panchayat*, on which she was allotted 28,000 rupees under the BPL scheme only recently. She had to spend her savings in building a temporary dwelling, in addition to the interim relief provided by the government. The proposal from the family of 'this good young man', a driver, came at that time. Although his family expected at least 2,00,000 rupees of dowry,<sup>84</sup> 'he liked the girl very much', and they settled for 1,00,000 rupees. Respondent B immediately ('lest we would miss the opportunity') sold 4.5 cents of her homestead (she had no farmland), for 20,000 rupees, below the market price. She also parted with her cow for 5000 rupees. An amount of around 30,000 rupees was borrowed from different people. 'All were willing to give as they knew that both of us (Respondent B and son) were in good health and would pay back in due course from our labour'. She also received small amounts of cash, gold and clothing as gift from her siblings, church, neighbourhood group and well-off people in the locality. Respondent B and son met all the expenses (hospital costs, costs of ceremonies) related to the birth of the first child. At the time of interview, she was worried that she could give only a gold chain of  $\frac{3}{4}$  *pavan*<sup>85</sup> to the grandchild, and not one *pavan* as she had hoped. It was humiliating for her daughter, especially since she had to stay with her in-laws. 'I had one daughter and see the trouble! Imagine if you have more', Respondent B said. She, nevertheless, defended the practice of dowry saying, 'it is essential for the security and good future of my daughter'.

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<sup>82</sup> The official term a temporary, weak dwelling in India (E.g. thatched roof, wooden walls and muddy floor). The opposite is *pucca*, a permanent, strong house built in the traditional (tiled roof) or the modern (concrete roof) way.

<sup>83</sup> An elusive phrase, the 'marriable age' in the village could be anywhere between 20 and 25.

<sup>84</sup> This includes payment in cash, gold and wedding expenses.

<sup>85</sup> One *pavan* is approximately 8 grams of 22 carat gold.

Case B points to the importance of economic (land, cow, jewellery) and human capital (labour, good health) in coping. More significantly, it shows how social capital is both related to and dependant upon the other resources, a point that we shall elaborate later. Though the depletion of assets would be comparatively less than what is portrayed in this case study, the condition of the better off is also not much different. Small farmers, a non-poor category, in the area usually take agricultural loan, if possible, or resort to borrowing and pawning jewellery<sup>86</sup> to invest in the crop. Many of them, especially those who had taken land on lease (*paattam*)<sup>87</sup>, explained during fieldwork that they had to postpone the marriage of daughters due to crop failure.

## 6.4 Coping With Shocks

### 6.4.1 Incapacitating Illness of the Male Income Earner

Costs associated with illness have been long recognized as a major driver of households into poverty (Pryer, 1989). Occasional sicknesses take away bits of household income, which could be recouped in the short run. In comparison, prolonging and incapacitating illnesses entail direct (expenses on treatment) as well as opportunity costs (labour days lost) for the poor (Russell, 2005).

#### Case C

Respondent C (male aged 35) used to work as an agricultural labourer till three years back when he was diagnosed with heart disease and had to undergo a surgery. He lives with his wife, aged 30, three children, all girls aged 10, 8 and 4, and mother aged 58, in the better-off and easily accessible locality in the village. The household owns 6 cents of homestead (worth around 60,000 rupees) and 4 *para*<sup>88</sup> of farmland (worth around 20,000 rupees). They managed to cover the costs of treatment and medicines with the little savings and jewellery that they had. They also received small amounts of money (100-300 rupees each) during several occasions as gift from relatives, friends and community groups. As hospital visits became regular, they were forced to borrow from neighbors and moneylenders. Respondent C put the household debt at the time of the interview at

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<sup>86</sup> Though one *paran* of gold was valued at around 6000 rupees during the study, a poor household may fetch only much less, even as low as 3000 rupees, if it pawns gold to a local moneylender during an emergency.

<sup>87</sup> It has, of late, been a common practice among the well-off, many of them absentee landlords, in Kuttanad to keep the farmland fallow or lease it to small farmers and agricultural labourers. Even in times of good harvest, these farmers are left with only a meagre profit after bearing the costs of cultivation and paying off the lease price.

<sup>88</sup> *Para* is the local measure of farmland (1 *para* = 10 cents).

around 40,000 rupees. His wife, who works as an agricultural labourer, said she finds additional work by traveling to far-off paddy fields, especially during harvest, so that the household can earn extra money and repay some of the debt. His mother, though sick herself, is also going for work. She said she would prefer to take rest after having worked hard all her life, but cannot because the son is ill. Since the household belongs to the official BPL category, they are eligible for subsidized healthcare. However, money needs still to be spent in traveling to the hospital as well as for buying medicines that are not available through public health outlets. The wife borrows 100-200 rupees from the women's neighborhood group, of which she is a member, on most occasions when the couple visits the doctor. This money is usually given free of interest as '...the other group members understand our plight'. Neighbours sympathize with the family and are only too willing to help it within their limited means (they themselves are not much better-off), as Respondent C was known as a 'hard working man', who 'didn't waste money on alcohol' and 'took good care of his family'. As for her part, his wife repays the amount she borrows from the group promptly within a few days of labour. In addition, she regularly attends the group meetings and contributes the mandatory 10 rupees every week. Respondent C said that the household has been spending around 1500-2000 rupees on the treatment every month. Of late, it has become increasingly difficult to bring the children up, provide for their education and give them proper food. They were forced to give out the farmland on *otti*<sup>89</sup> for 10,000 rupees. The wife's parents, who stay in the nearby town, though poor themselves, came forward to provide for the eldest daughter's education a few months back. She has since been staying with them and attending school. The second daughter receives clothes and books from the nuns who run her school and mid day meal under the government scheme. The youngest daughter attends the nearby *angamwadi*<sup>90</sup> wherefrom she gets food. The household has not cut down the number of meals, but changed the kind of food it consumes. They have begun to depend more on home-grown vegetables, reduce milk and fish intake and buy meat only during festivities.

The case study shows that economic (jewellery, land) and human (extra labour) capital form important constituents of coping during illness for the poor households. The role of social capital is also significant. Borrowing and financial help from friends, neighbours and relatives as well as loan and financial help from self-help/neighbourhood groups were the major forms of social capital reported by the poor in our sample during illness.

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<sup>89</sup> *Otti* is a temporary transfer of ownership of land in exchange for a fixed amount of money, often below the market price. During the period, the temporary owner can use the land at her/his discretion. The land is returned back to the original owner upon repayment of the money. *Otti* is different from *paattam* (lease) mentioned earlier.

<sup>90</sup> *Angamwadi* is a village level state sponsored child development centre and playschool formed under the Integrated Child Development Scheme.



However, as we shall see shortly, social capital is characterized by a certain degree of reciprocity, making it an unavailable resource for the chronic poor.

#### *6.4.2 Death of the Male Income Earner*

Death, especially of the male earning member, is another widely acknowledged factor contributing to poverty. Often, death of male earners comes at the end of prolonged illnesses that might already have taken away a large part of household resources, leaving female partners in economic vulnerability and social exclusion (Hulme, 2004).

#### Case D

Respondent D (female aged 39), an agricultural labourer, lives in a newly constructed, incomplete two-room house situated in the middle of the paddy field<sup>91</sup>. She has three children, all boys, aged 16, 15 and 13. Her husband, a fish worker, died at work in 2001. The household had moved from his ancestral home to the present plot after buying it seven years before his death. It was originally a 2 *para* paddy field, part of which they elevated to build a *kutcha* dwelling. Respondent D said she was not provided with any immediate relief from the government or the welfare fund for fish workers in the event of her husband's death. However, the household was classified as BPL AAY (official category for the very poor and the destitute), which has qualified them to be eligible to receive highly subsidized food grain and kerosene (the house is yet to be electrified) through the public distribution outlet. The household also received 28,000 rupees as assistance from the government to build a *pucca* house. After the husband's death Respondent D's brother and sister came forward to take part of the schooling expenses of the children. The neighbours also helped her by giving small amounts of money as gift and lending money during emergencies. As for her part, Respondent D worked hard trying to find as much labour as possible during the harvest season<sup>92</sup>. She also recalled that the cow that she had bought under the government loan scheme before the husband's death helped the family survive during off-season.

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<sup>91</sup> It is mostly the poor households that choose to live inside the paddy field. Paddy cultivation in Kuttanad is done below mean sea level in vast fields protected by dykes. During off-season water is let in leaving houses that are situated on elevated plots of land inside the paddy field surrounded on all sides with water. This poses serious constraints on daily life including transportation to the mainland, which is possible only on small canoes.

<sup>92</sup> Most of the poor labourers in Kuttanad, given good health and normal crop, try to find as much work as possible during harvest. Most of the harvest is sold soon after to repay accumulated debt. The remaining grain is stored to provide for food till the next harvest. Relying on public distribution outlets compensates for any shortfall.

Case D demonstrates the role of the State as a safety net, protecting the poor from falling into chronic poverty (subsidized services, house, cow). More importantly, apart from this rather 'direct' role, adequate and timely State support also ensures that the poor have the basic resources that will enhance their claims to social networks and relations, as we shall argue in the next section.

### **6.5 Coping Strategies of the Poor: What, When, How and To What Extent?**

Defined as 'the capital base...which are essential for the pursuit of any livelihood strategy' (Scoones, 1998), economic capital could theoretically be the core fallback for a household in crisis. Less susceptible to loss in value in normal conditions, it is accumulated over time as savings, assets and investments. Land (case C), jewellery (cases B and C) and savings (cases A and B) are the major economic resources used by the households that we have studied. The poor, however, fail to garner enough stocks of economic capital to face and survive through stresses and shocks. For them, it is a reliable but largely unavailable resource. Also, it is quickly exhausted during stresses (sale of cow in case B) and shocks (parting with land in case C).

Human capital, to the poor, is the ability to labour and skills. This resource, however, is constrained in many ways. Firstly, illness and disability limit the ability to labour of the poor and accelerate their slide into chronic poverty (case C). Secondly, personal attributes and gender pose barriers in finding work and put ceilings on wages. Finding work, especially during the off-season, requires knowledge and effort (travelling far for work in case C). As Moser (1998) has noted, adverse conditions push women into work ('retired' mother forced to work in case C) and force them to work harder. However, the extra work put in by the women, in cases where the male earner is ill (case C) or deceased (case D) does not compensate for the shortfall as they are underpaid compared to males. Women agricultural labourers in our study area, for instance, are paid only almost half the day's wage for men. Human capital, thus, appears for the poor as an unreliable resource, if at all available.

### *6.5.1 Social Capital and the Poor: Constraints and Possibilities*

Turning now to the role of social capital: when and how does social capital help the poor? (how) is it related to the other resources?

To the pioneers of the concept, social capital ‘...exists in the *relations* among persons’ (Coleman, 1988, p. 100-1). Applying the concept to development, it has been argued that the poor have and make extensive use of ‘relations’, especially social capital of the ‘bonding’ type (Woolcock and Narayan, 2000: 227). Our results also support this (son’s friend helping to build a house in case A, relatives and friends supporting in cases B – for wedding, C and D – for coping with sickness and death).

Key ingredients of the concept of social capital, in its original form (Coleman, 1988, Putnam, 1995) as well as in the way it has been applied to development (Harriss and de Renzio, 1997), include ‘trust’, shared ‘norms’ and action for ‘mutual benefit’. The underlying characteristic here is ‘reciprocity’, a factor very well acknowledged in social capital (Coleman, 1988) and development literature (Moser, 1998). Here, however, the utility of social capital for the poor appears tricky.

Firstly, the social capital argument centers on ‘generalized reciprocity’ (Harriss and de Renzio, 1997), a situation where people share things without expectations of (immediate or short-term) return. In practice, however, there are always expectations of and obligations to return.

The coping poor could keep their social capital in tact since they were able to meet expectations and fulfill obligations. The reciprocity involved need not be ‘equal’ and ‘specific’. For example, in case A, the son’s friend ‘repays’ the non-monetary help during father’s death and sister’s marriage by saving the labour cost. In case C, the wife fulfils the group obligations and benefits from interest free emergency loans. The chronic poor, however, fail to reciprocate. The following is illustrative:

Respondent Q, aged 37, lives with her husband (sick and unable to work for several years) and two school-going children, aged 14 and 12, in a *keutcha* dwelling (hut). Poor and highly vulnerable according to the local definition, the household represents a failed case, chronic poor, as opposed to the coping poor in our case studies. It has little economic capital (owns three cents of land on which the hut has been built, lost jewellery to

moneylender, incurred huge debt) and barely survives on Respondent Q's labour. Social capital of the household has been steadily eroding. After defaulting many times on weekly contributions, Respondent Q 'had to quit' the women's self-help group. Relatives, friends and neighbours do not help her as they used to, though they 'still care'. 'They are also labourers, themselves not much better off', says Respondent Q.

Secondly, claims to social capital are highly dependent on the presence, 'perceived' or 'real', of some amounts of human and economic capital.

As such, case B represents a 'stable household'. People were willing to lend since they were confident that the mother and the son were 'in good health' and would pay back from their 'labour' (human capital). In case C, the neighbours sympathize with the plight of the man who was 'hard working' and 'didn't waste money on alcohol'. The case, however, shows a 'household in a state of flux', characterized by eroding economic capital and inability to manage on its human capital. It is gradually losing its claims to social capital as a result. The illustration of Respondent Q above represents a 'failed household', with no economic capital and little human capital, making it hard to make claims on networks and relations.

Thus, for the poor, the availability of social capital and claims over it depend on (expectations of) reciprocity and the presence of minimum amounts of human and economic capital. In other words, we posit that, for the poor, social capital is a 'conditional resource'; conditional upon the presence of other resources.

Conceptualizing social capital as a 'conditional resource' is advantageous. On the one hand, it throws light on the constraints that social capital imposes on the poor. On the other, on a positive note, it also demonstrates the possibilities that social capital offers. As we have argued, the low levels of physical assets and human capital as well as the sociostructural barriers impeding their exercise of agency (Cleaver, 2005), prevent the poor from drawing on social capital in times of need. Social capital appears, in such instances, as a 'dependant variable' meaning that poverty is not caused by a decline in social capital but a decline in social capital is the result of poverty (Schuurman, 2003: 1000).

These apparent constraints, nevertheless, could be turned into opportunities provided there exists mechanisms that help create and sustain economic and human capital for the poor. Endowments of economic and human capital, in turn, will result in the poor being able to claim more from networks and relations. The State, supported by private initiatives, plays a key role here, as demonstrated in the study.

Table 6.1: *Coping Strategies of the Poor – What, When, How and To What Extent?*

What	When		How	To What Extent
	Role during			
	Stresses	Shocks		
<i>Economic Capital</i>	High	High	Jewellery, savings, land	Reliable but hard to accumulate, basis of claim to social capital, depleted during stresses and shocks – Cases B and C
<i>Human Capital</i>	Medium	High	Labour, skills	Unreliable, depends on labour market conditions (availability of work) and personal attributes (gender, good health, ability to search and find work) – Cases C and D
<i>Social Capital</i>	Medium	Medium/ Low	Borrowing, group membership, gifts, services	Unreliable, characterized by reciprocity, depends on availability of economic and human capital – Cases A, B and C
<i>Institutions</i>	Government	High/ Medium	Poverty targeting schemes (PDS, mid-day meals)	Strict and ‘objective’ eligibility conditions, legitimate and accountable source – Cases A and D
	Private/ NGOs	Medium	Medium/ Low	Charity, group membership, loans

State acts as a provider of basic needs (house in cases A, B and D, subsidized food in case D) as well as a facilitator in crises (flood relief in case B, subsidized health services in case C). However, State support rests on strict norms and ‘objective’ eligibility conditions. These ‘objective’ conditions often come detrimental to the interests of people who are at the brim of the poor – non-poor divide (vulnerable non-poor, transitory poor). While the State acts as a provider/facilitator, private institutions (NGOs, voluntary initiatives, charity) play the role of a buffer. NGOs operate with lax and

‘subjective’ norms, mixing both the poor as well as the non-poor in their clientele. As such, the transitory poor may find their interests fulfilled by these organizations. For instance, the major NGO in our study area caters basically to the needs of farmers, a group identified as vulnerable non-poor in our participatory study, which would fall outside the target of BPL programmes of the government. However, as we observed during our fieldwork and as studies elsewhere have demonstrated (Thorp et al, 2005), the chronic poor may fail to gain access to NGO programmes or drop mid-way. As far as charity is concerned, it requires ‘connections’, ‘visibility’ and benevolence, making it an unreliable source of coping. Thus, compared to private institutions, State represents, from a rights perspective (de Gaay Fortman, 2003), a ‘legitimate’ and accountable source of support for the poor. Table 6.1 provides a summary of our arguments.

## **6.6 Conclusion**

Coping strategies of the poor are ‘complex and diverse’ (Chambers, 1989: 3). The various resources pose constraints as well as offer possibilities for the poor. However, they are not able to freely choose and claim these resources. As such there are limits to the resilience and the resourcefulness of the poor. It is, in fact, a combination of resources, than a single one, that helps them cope. However, as we have argued, social capital is a ‘conditional resource’ for the poor and its usefulness is dependant to a large extent on the presence of the other resources.

Our study points to the pivotal ‘developmental’ role of the State, which in recent times seems to have unsuccessfully been traded off with voluntary private initiatives as well as social capital (Zaidi, 1999, Fine, 1999, Schuurman, 2003). The poor, as we have tried to argue, will benefit from private initiatives, such as NGOs, and be able to capitalize on networks and relations, only when a ‘critical mass’ of other resources is present. Adequate and timely intervention by the State would ensure the presence of this ‘critical mass’.

A key issue here is to identify who are the poor, especially the vulnerable poor, and to target them, preventing their slide into chronic poverty. Given the diversity of the poor and their living worlds (Chambers, 1989, 1995), contextualised indicators and methods to identify the poor and the vulnerable must be developed, just as what we did (Chapter 5, Part B) and progress monitored periodically. Local governments, supported by NGOs, will play a crucial role in this process.

## VII

### NGO APPROACH AND RESPONSES TO POVERTY<sup>93</sup>

#### 7.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a contrasting narrative of the approach and the responses of a local NGO and the State to development/poverty in Kuttanad. We find that while the State takes a largely 'growth' centric approach to regional development, the NGO in the case study is guided by a local-oriented, 'sustainability' model. The key analytical contribution of the chapter, however, is in explaining the dynamics of NGO-State relations. We argue that NGOs exhibit multiple identities – selective collaboration, gap-filling and posing alternatives – in the process of engagement with the State. Reading this alongside recent empirical evidence, we suggest that the relationship between the two needs to be conceptualized as more complex, and not confrontationist as often posited. Such conceptualization will help understand the limitations as also the possibilities of NGOs and the State in different development contexts, which in turn can inform policies. We will begin with a brief review of the changing landscape of NGO-State relations.

Lacking universal definition (Vakil, 1997), non-governmental organizations (NGOs) represent a large set of heterogeneous groups, small as well as big as development organizations, relief agencies, social service societies, environmental groups, community based groups, pressure groups, charities and so forth and their networks, operating from the local to the global level, in the developing as well as in the developed world, on many issues, often in collaboration with each other (Desai, 2002: 495). Though NGOs were in existence in various forms since the 1950s (Lewis, 2001: 29-61), it was in the wake of the impasse in development during the 1980s (Schuurman, 1993) that they proliferated as development actors.

The early literature on NGOs envisages them as a third way beyond the market as well as the State. More importantly, the conceptualization is characterized by what we could call a 'binary model', positing NGOs or grassroots organizations as opposites or 'alternatives' to the State as well as market. This is true of both the mainstream development literature (Drabek, 1987) as well as the writings in critical development studies (Escobar, 1992).

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<sup>93</sup> This chapter is based on an unpublished manuscript, Thomas, B.K, R. Muradian, G. de Groot and A. de Ruijter, 'Confronting or Complementing? A Case Study on NGO-State Relations from Kerala, India' (March 2009), under review.

Though a more balanced picture is portrayed in later studies (Bebbington and Farrington, 1993), surveying the strengths as well as weaknesses of NGOs as also areas of their conflict as well as co-operation with the State, the 'either-or' binary model was still very much in place during the late 1990s (Zaidi, 1999).

Of late, however, NGO-State relations have undergone significant shifts. NGOs find many of their role and functions coinciding with the State. The originators of participatory development (Chambers, 1994: 958), NGOs encountered the reality where the State began to take over this role in the wake of decentralization (Véron, 2001). Local governments are increasingly getting involved in activities such as micro-credit, a traditional domain of NGOs, as well as in devising better strategies for inclusive development at the grassroots (Bebbington and Bebbington, 2001: 15). Even as such changes have been taking place externally in relation to the State, NGOs and grassroots organizations themselves have been changing internally, leading some critics to argue that globalization has lend these organizations vulnerable to corporatization and 'reproducing the state' (Kamat, 2002: 166-7).

Surveying NGO-State relations in India over a period of fifty years Sen (1999) notes three distinct phases. The first was an 'era of co-operation' (1947 to late 1950s) characterized by a strong State, that had the task of nation-building in the post-colonial decades, supported by NGOs which were largely welfare and modernisation oriented. This period was followed by the 'emergence of antagonism' (1960s and 1970s) where the State challenged the more action oriented NGOs, but was still favourable to the welfare oriented organisations, whose activities by and large supplemented its development efforts. The third phase was marked by 'increased State control' (1980s and 1990s) of NGOs which led many in the sector to argue that their political space has been constrained and that the State was either unwilling to accept or feel threatened by the 'alternative development models' promoted by the NGOs (Sen, 1999: 341). Even as this was the case, the period from the late 1980s to the present has witnessed 'uneasy partnerships' (Kudva, 2005: 245) between the State and the NGOs. A reason for such partnerships could be that the State wanted NGOs to take over delivery of social services, an activity from which it had been withdrawing in the wake of neo-liberal policies (Sen, 1999: 346).

In Kerala, though 'public action', implying active intervention of the State as well as social movements in public life, has been a central characteristic of its widely acclaimed 'Kerala model' (Drèze and Sen, 2002: 16, 97-101), co-operation, or conflict for that matter, between NGOs and the State has been rather sporadic (Sooryamoorthy and Gangrade, 2001: 67, Sooryamoorthy, 2002: 181). There have been successful NGO-State



partnerships, such as the Total Literacy Campaign or the People's Resource Mapping Programme of the late 1980s (Isaac and Franke, 2002: 21-41). While it was mostly under the Left wing governments that such partnerships were fostered, for specific massive social development projects, we could say that it was largely limited to 'progressive'/Left oriented NGOs such as the Kerala Shasthra Sahithya Parishath (KSSP). Also noticeable is that Church-based NGOs, a major force in Kerala (Sooryamoorthy, 2002: 168), are largely independent of the State as far as financial resources are concerned and take an ideologically opposite stance to the Left<sup>94</sup>.

The decentralization programme initiated by the Left government in the late 1990s was a watershed in NGO-State relations in Kerala (Isaac and Franke, 2002: 21-41). Decentralization resulted in the devolution of administrative and fiscal power to the local governments, enabling them to implement development plans prepared in consultation with local people, based on their needs and priorities, through participatory processes. Networks of households called Neighbourhood Groups (NHGs), formed at the local level, all over Kerala, under the *Kudumbashree* programme of the government, played a vital role in this. While some commentators have argued that decentralization has led to the creation of synergies between NGOs and State at the local level paving the way for a 'New' Kerala Model (Véron, 2001), there were concerns at the grassroots from the NGOs that 'their space was being encroached upon' and that the State was trying to create 'government run NGOs' through the NHG-based structure<sup>95</sup>.

Thus, NGOs have, of late, found some of their traditional domains coinciding with or being taken away by the State. How do they position themselves vis-à-vis the State in the changed scenario? What are the implications for conceptualizing NGO-State relations? We try to offer some pointers on these lines by analyzing the trajectory and interventions of a local NGO (henceforth denoted by the pseudonym KNGO) vis-à-vis the State, drawing from fieldwork conducted in Kuttanad.

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<sup>94</sup> Apart from their basic differences in worldviews (faith v/s atheism), the Church and the Left in Kerala have been historically at opposites, ever since the ouster of the Communist Party led government of 1957, in which the Church played a major role. Though the sharp divide has narrowed down over time, differences still persist on approach and policies.

<sup>95</sup> Thomas Isaac, one of the architects of the Kerala decentralization programme, in an interview to *Frontline* (August 2003), <http://www.hinduonnet.com/fline/fl2016/stories/20030815003004300.htm> (Accessed on 10.10.2008). This is an issue that we will also take up later on in this chapter.

## 7.2 Research Methods and Approach

The empirical material used in this chapter draws from a variety of sources. As described in detail in Chapter 4, sections 4.3.2 through 4.3.5, we undertook fieldwork in Kuttanad during 2002-03 and 2004-05. Recapitulating briefly, the first phase of fieldwork formed part of a project in which the researcher's organization and KNGO acted as partners. This collaboration facilitated easy access to the organization. The second phase of fieldwork, on which this chapter mainly relies on, was conducted independently. The methodology was quasi-ethnographic, comprising of a community level study followed by a survey of selected households. Focus group discussions, informal interviews, observation and triangulation constituted the community level study. For the survey, we selected 100 households. A purposive sample was chosen ensuring that it contained households exhibiting diverse characteristics; poor as well as non-poor, KNGO members as well as non-members. We held discussions with KNGO leader and staff during the two phases of fieldwork. Field data was supplemented with information from secondary sources such as scientific and popular literature on Kuttanad, organizational documents of KNGO and media reports.

While presenting and analyzing the case study, we situate KNGO and the State within the historical and socio-political setting of Kuttanad. In doing so, we follow to a certain extent what Nauta (2004: 255-6) calls an 'embedded tale' approach to studying NGOs. This approach posits that to give a fuller explanation of issues, NGO research should be embedded and interpreted in its historical and socio-political contexts than merely look at the organization or a specific intervention at a particular point in time. The ensuing sections situate KNGO in relation to the State within the historical and socio-political setting of Kuttanad. We conclude with a discussion on the key insights from the study.

## 7.3 The State in Kuttanad's Development<sup>96</sup>

### 7.3.1 *The Early Phase*

Kuttanad has a turbulent development history with the State playing an active role throughout. The region's encounter with development began in the early 19<sup>th</sup> century through State sponsored reclamation of vast areas of land for paddy cultivation, from what used to be part of the Vembanad Lake, resulting in the creation of a rice economy (Narayanan, 2003: 93-9).

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<sup>96</sup> This section is based on Chapter 4, Section 4.2.

The key characteristic of this period was what we could call a 'social dilemma', with an oppressive class/caste structure dividing the society into a mass of slave agricultural labourers, mostly from the Pulaya or Paraya caste, and a few landlords, belonging to the upper caste Hindus or Syrian Christians. The life and living conditions of the Harijan slaves depended on the upper caste landlord (Kannan, 1988: 233-6). The Capitalist agriculture resulting in the creation of a rural proletariat evoked radical responses during the 1930s from the growing Socialist movement in Kerala, leading to the organization of agricultural labourers. The Hindu progressive reform movements also contributed to positive social change in Kuttanad during this period.

Victory of Communists in the first election to Kerala legislature in 1957 paved the way for landmark legal enactments including land reforms of the 1960s (Ramachandran, 2000: 98-9) and The Kerala Agricultural Workers Act of 1974, leading to significant changes in the socio-economic life of Kuttanad. Positioned within the wider Kerala context, the social development in the state resulted in the reduction of absolute poverty, improvement in the quality of life (better access to food, health care and education) and enhancement of social status of the previously deprived in Kuttanad.

Improved social well-being, however, posed an 'economic dilemma' in Kuttanad. The official State policy had envisaged the future development of the region centering on its rice economy. The changed social conditions apparently acted against it (Narayanan, 2003). Firstly, the 'attitudinal shifts', resulting from high education levels and social mobility, generated aversion to agriculture and preference for service sector jobs. Even while labour surplus and consequent unemployment prevailed, paddy fields encountered labour shortages.

Secondly, the fragmentation of land, an offshoot of land reforms, culminated in two competing perspectives, one attributed to farmers and the other to labourers, on the rice-centric development model of Kuttanad (Narayanan, 2006). The 'farmer perspective' argued that paddy cultivation has become unviable or uneconomical and the farmers be allowed freedom in choosing the crop that they cultivate. The State policy, as outlined in the Kerala Land Utilization Order, prohibited conversion of paddy land, being a source of food, to other (cash) crops or constructions (except housing). The 'labour perspective' argued that rice cultivation should continue, pointing out the threat to food security as well as the environmental damage and the loss of employment, especially for women.

### *7.3.2 The Current Ecological Crisis*

The State policy to further the rice-centric economy of Kuttanad also created an 'ecological crisis'. To the planners the natural peculiarities of the region posed 'problems' that needed to be solved if the policy objectives were to be realized (Narayanan, 2003, KSSP, 1992).

Firstly, a way out had to be found to drain off the water that accumulates during seasonal flooding in Kuttanad. To this, experts proposed the construction of a spillway towards the sea at Thottapally. The work started in 1951 and the spillway, with forty gates, was functional by 1955. However, the structure proved to be an engineering failure as only less than one-third of the expected amount of water passed through it.

Secondly, the salinity intrusion from the sea during summer to the lake and thereby to the paddy fields had to be prevented to facilitate a second crop. Construction of a water regulator at Thanneermukkom was recommended to solve this problem. Though the work started in 1955, the regulator became functional only in 1974. It was idealized that the shutters of the regulator will be lowered from December to June, thus blocking the inflow of saline water. However, the regulator also failed to achieve its objectives. In addition, the demand for 'development', as time progressed, led to the construction of numerous roads and pathways in Kuttanad.

Apart from not solving the original problems, the spillway and the regulator put additional pressure on the region, primarily on the environment and thereby on the livelihood of the people. While roads brought in better accessibility, lack of foresight in their construction invited ecological damage and health hazards as well. Several fish species that grow in saline water disappeared over time after the construction of the regulator. The marine varieties lost the backwater area that they used as their nurseries. This, in turn, has affected the livelihood of the fish workers. There prevails currently a conflict of interest between the farmers who want to keep the regulator closed and the fish workers who want it to be kept open (Narayanan, 2003: 109-10). On the other hand, damages to the spillway and the regulator over time has rendered both partially dysfunctional leading to saline water intrusion enough to damage the farmers' crops.

The regulator, spillway and the haphazardly built roads created artificial blockages in the natural flow of water (Thampuran, 2004, KSSP, 1992), leading, in turn, to the thriving of weeds, accumulation of pesticides from the paddy fields and human as well as animal waste in the water. Currently Kuttanad faces acute drinking water scarcity, in spite of being surrounded by water. The region has high morbidity with waterborne and seasonal diseases, such as encephalitis, hepatitis and leptospirosis common among its people. The State policy to promote tourism on a wider scale in Kuttanad has put additional pressure on the region's ecology in recent times. Doubts about the potential of tourism to create employment to the local people aside, the release of fuel, excreta and plastic into the backwaters by tourist houseboats has adversely affected their quality of life, which has already been on the decline. The recent policy documents of the Government of Kerala, acknowledges the damage caused by 'developmental activities' and tourism to Kuttanad's wetland ecosystem, a region of international importance under the Ramsar Convention on wetlands (GoK, 2007: Chapter 6, Box 6.3).

To sum up, the approach and responses of the State to the development of Kuttanad has been characterized largely by a 'growth' centric approach as opposed to a 'sustainability' oriented model. Though concerns about livelihood and environmental sustainability have at times been raised (such as the call to protect paddy cultivation), these have either been a 'minority view' or not favoured through political consensus. Even as social and human development has helped reduce absolute deprivation at the 'micro' (household/community) level, absence of a long-term vision and flaws in development planning has created a crisis, predominantly ecological, at the 'meso' (regional) level.

#### **7.4 KNGO vis-à-vis the State**

A selective survey of KNGO's trajectory as well as its approach and responses to the 'development dilemma' of Kuttanad is attempted next, centering on its positioning vis-à-vis the State.

##### *7.4.1 The Swasbraya Vision*

KNGO, which describes itself as a 'voluntary development organization', was formed under the leadership of the regional Catholic archdiocese in 1979. Constituted under the provisions of the Charitable Societies Act, it remained dormant until 1993, when a highly motivated Catholic priest was appointed as its executive director, the chief of operations. Over the next decade, it progressed from a community based organization to an activist NGO taking up the wider ecological and socio-economic issues confronting Kuttanad.

The organization has placed the ecological and economic crises of Kuttanad squarely at the centre of its development vision for the region as well as in the several programmatic interventions. KNGO's development vision on Kuttanad centres on the notion of Swashraya or self-reliance. The organization envisages the creation of '...Swashraya Kuttanad adhering to the principles of self-reliance and keeping the spirit of (Gandhian) Grama Swaraj...' <sup>97</sup>. Kuttanad being a collection of numerous villages, the analogy of village self-rule/self-reliance (Grama Swaraj) is apt. In promoting the Swashraya vision, KNGO has posited the self-sufficient and prosperous past of Kuttanad against the grave livelihood and environmental crisis of the present.

At a more operational level, KNGO recognizes that human deprivation/poverty has many faces such as '...hunger, lack of shelter and access to drinking water, illiteracy (and) ill-health...'. Drawing from the 'human development' (Sen, 2000; Alkire, 2002) and 'sustainable development' (Lélé, 1991) paradigms, which are directly acknowledged, the organization wants anti-poverty programmes to culminate into '...self-propelled community processes with justice to man (livelihood) and natural resources (the environment)'. Furthermore, adding a gender dimension, KNGO views women as the 'primary agents' of human development.

#### *7.4.2 The Early Phase: The SHG Movement*

The origin and growth of most NGOs, as Korten (1987: 155) notes, could be related to '...the high moral purpose, good will, hard work, and common sense...' of one or more individuals. The charisma of its new leader as well as his persistent methods were key factors behind KNGO's entry into the local community and consolidation of its activities. The primary operating strategy during this early phase was to mobilize the community and organize them into self-help groups (SHGs) of 10-20 households, a practice that is common among Southern development NGOs. Again replicating models elsewhere, such as Grameen in Bangladesh, the SHGs comprised only of women, one from each household in a particular neighbourhood. The SHG centered strategy followed directly from the Swashraya vision of KNGO - 'from Swashraya households to Swashraya villages'; 'from Swashraya villages to Swashraya Kuttanad'. KNGO being a Catholic organization and its leader the parish vicar, it was basically the women from the parish households that formed the first SHGs. The SHGs shortly took an inclusive character, with women from other communities also joining, and evolved into a local movement.

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<sup>97</sup> The quotations are from the decennial report of KNGO published in 2004, which surveys its activities over a decade since its inception.

The primary activity of the first SHGs was micro-credit (savings model). The objective was to eliminate money lenders, encourage small savings and provide, to some extent, economic independence and security for poor households. In an effort to formalize the movement, the SHGs were linked to mainstream banks by KNGO under the 'linkage programme' of the National Bank for Agriculture and Rural Development (NABARD)<sup>98</sup>. Later on, with the objective of promoting sustainable livelihoods to the households, the SHGs were given training in occupational skills such as manufacturing and/or assembling of consumer items such as notebooks, umbrellas and soap (business model). Income generating activities such as horticulture, coir yarn making, rabbit, poultry and duck rearing were promoted with the objective of supporting or reviving locally relevant livelihood activities. Efforts were also made to put the previously wasted local materials like water hyacinth into productive use such as making of artistic and utility items that could be marketed. The fundamental objective was to form groups, find out and nurture the creative energies in them and eventually leave them to manage by themselves in the spirit of Swashraya. As far as we could observe, the savings model of KNGO sustained, despite challenges described below, however, the business model was not very successful.

#### 7.4.3 Enter the State: 'Crowding Out' of SHGs and Emergence of a 'New' KNGO

As we noted in the beginning, NHGs were formed all over Kerala under the *Kudumbashree* project, in the wake of the decentralization programme of the government during the late 1990s. In structure as well as in functioning, the State's NHGs replicated the traditional SHGs of the NGOs. With massive inflow of resources at the local level<sup>99</sup> and active promotion by the local self-government bodies, several of them ventured into micro-enterprises (business model), in addition to basic micro-credit activities (savings model). The success of the business model at Mararikulam, a region close to Kuttanad, that attracted international acclaim,<sup>100</sup> was a motivation for many NHGs to undertake such efforts.

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<sup>98</sup> For details of the 'linkage programme', see [http://www.nabard.org/microfinance/support\\_ngo.asp](http://www.nabard.org/microfinance/support_ngo.asp) (accessed on 23.10.2008).

<sup>99</sup> It was envisaged under Kerala's decentralization programme that 35 to 40 per cent of the plan funds will be earmarked for the local self-governments (*panchayats*). See, Isaac, T. M. T. (2000) 'Campaign For Democratic Decentralization in Kerala', <http://www.ssc.wisc.edu/~wright/Isaacpaper.PDF> (accessed on 23.10.2008).

<sup>100</sup> Franke, R. W. (2002) 'The Mararikulam Experiment: An International Perspective', available at <http://chss.montclair.edu/anthro/The%20Mararikulam%20Experiment.htm> (accessed on 23.10.2008).

The spread of *Kudumbashree* NHGs, however, posed serious challenge to the existence of KNGO SHGs. NHGs began ‘crowding out’ SHGs with many SHG members leaving their groups for NHGs. As we observed during fieldwork<sup>101</sup>, easy accessibility to/availability of borrowings/loans was a major factor behind this. KNGO, as a private actor, faced constraints in extending borrowings/loans liberally and had stringent conditions on eligibility and repayment. In the case of the government, these were lax. Furthermore, the NHGs catered to the requirements of the poorest, with membership largely limited to households in the official BPL (below poverty line) category. In contrast, in its SHGs, KNGO often mixed poor and non-poor households to ensure adequate liquidity and thereby financial sustainability. However, this created, as we observed in a few instances, intra-group rifts between the poor and the better-off members, resulting from the gap in their expectations from the group.

In the beginning, KNGO resented the State’s intrusion on its terrain. It directed the group members that they cannot hold membership in the SHGs and the NHGs at the same time. Later on, this tough stance was relaxed. More importantly, KNGO began innovating new SHG models. Even while trying to keep the old savings and business models intact, a new ‘issues-based model’ was experimented. A distinguishing feature of the new SHG model was that a common ‘issue’ was what held the group together and not proximity of stay as in NHGs or the old SHGs. Furthermore, there were both men’s as well as women’s groups in the new system, marking a departure from the old women-centered approach.

Different types of issues-based SHGs were formed. Housing SHGs comprised of members from households that were in need of a new house/toilet, engaging in savings, on the basis of which KNGO facilitated affordable housing loans from banks. Education was the focus of another issues-based SHG. In this case, acting as liaison between the banks and the SHG households, KNGO facilitated the provision of loans for higher education, previously unavailable for poor households<sup>102</sup>.

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<sup>101</sup> ‘Crowding out’ of SHGs was evident to us during 2004-05 field visits. We noted that several of the SHG households that we had interviewed during 2002-03, had left them and joined NHGs.

<sup>102</sup> In the list of priorities of the local people, which we had elicited during both community level research as well as household survey, housing and education had figured prominently, along with drinking water. KNGO had already been involved in the provision of drinking water, using Ferro-cement rainwater harvesting tanks, constructed through its SHG network, which has perhaps been one of its high impact grassroots interventions.



There was enthusiastic response to the education loan scheme. Many households in our study area wanted bank loans for professional education, especially in nursing, in private colleges outside Kerala, which are very expensive. The burgeoning demand for nurses in the West, articulated by popular media, as well as the visible economic success of migrant nurses contributed to the perception of this investment being worthwhile. While poor households individually could not fulfill the collateral requirements of the banks, loans could be granted on the basis of the financial discipline of the SHGs as well as the goodwill of KNGO, the liaison agency.

New SHGs of farmers were also formed, linking them with banks through which group loans were provided to undertake agriculture. Farmers' SHGs were of strategic significance, politically, socio-economically and ecologically. Farmers in Kuttanad are largely Syrian Christians, the community that has promoted KNGO. Their interests, being erstwhile landowners, are usually characterized as antagonistic to the interests of labour, the constituency that the political Left in Kerala stands for. Furthermore, as we noted in the beginning, the Church, and consequently Church-based NGOs, has been taking an ideologically opposite stance to the Left<sup>103</sup>. Though this has generally been the case, as a result of the socio-economic transformation that the region underwent, farmer-labourer distinction in Kuttanad has over time become blurred. On the one hand, the erstwhile landowning farmers have become worse-off and on the other, several agricultural labourers have become landowners or lease-farmers. The farmers' SHGs were strategic avenues to bring these contesting political constituencies on to a single platform. Furthermore, these groups were encouraged to undertake organic farming (of rice and other crops) and 'one paddy, one fish' (crop rotation between paddy and fish)<sup>104</sup>, adding ecological and economic significance.

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<sup>103</sup> Given the high political consciousness that has been characteristic of the history of Kuttanad, the ideological/political rift between the Church/farmers and the Left/labourers has rendered cooperation between KNGO and the Left ruled *panchayats* in the region difficult at times.

<sup>104</sup> The 'farmer v/s labour perspectives' (Narayanan, 2006) differ with regard to freedom (not) to undertake paddy cultivation, as we noted earlier. This divergence is also sharp as regards crop rotation. The 'expert view' supports crop rotation on the grounds of increase in fertility as well as productivity (Thomas, 2002). However, the 'labour perspective'/political Left argues that this will result in loss of labour days in the short-run and divert the farmers from food-crop (paddy) to more lucrative crops in the long-run, thereby endangering food security. Against this backdrop, KNGOs efforts in promoting farming of other crops and crop rotation remain politically contentious.

Even as it has been devising such innovations at the community level, holding its ground firm, KNGO began to scale-up its presence to the regional level. A paddy crisis gripped Kuttanad during 2003-04, placing several farm households in crisis. The administrative lax in repairing the damaged salt water regulator, discussed earlier, and operating it on time, were major reasons for saline water intrusion into the paddy fields that destroyed crop. Furthermore, delay in paddy off-take by the administration and lack of provision for storage of harvested crop to protect it from rain had forced the farmers to sell their harvest at very low prices to private rice mills. Against this backdrop, KNGO took an activist mode, engaging in public protests<sup>105</sup>, calling for State intervention to resolve the situation. It also organized public consultations to create awareness on the complex inter-linkages between geography and livelihoods in Kuttanad while devising development plans for the region. In this scaled-up, activist mode, KNGO seemed to place itself up against the State. Going further, KNGO mobilized farmers, collected paddy, processed, often using the traditional method<sup>106</sup>, branded and marketed it directly, thereby bypassing exploitative middlemen and private rice mills.

Summarizing, KNGO's approach and responses to Kuttanad's development dilemma has been guided by a local-oriented, 'sustainability' model. This stands in contrast to the largely 'growth' centered approach of the State. From an organizational development perspective, we could say that KNGO has started exhibiting the characteristics of what Korten (1987) calls 'third generation NGOs'. Over time, a 'new' KNGO has evolved, distinguished from the 'old' KNGO by '...effective strategies involving longer time perspectives, broadened definitions of the development problem, increased attention to issues of public policy, and a shift from exclusively operational to more catalytic roles' (Korten, 1987:147). As we saw, KNGO's relationship with the State has also been undergoing changes alongside, both at the 'micro' (community) as well as the 'meso' (regional) levels.

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<sup>105</sup> This was evident during our 2004-05 fieldwork and later, in contrast to the time when we first came in touch with KNGO. The organization, along with its leader, began to figure prominently in popular media for its activism as well as development interventions.

<sup>106</sup> Traditional paddy processing in Kuttanad, which has, of late, been on the decline, involves boiling of paddy, drying in the sun and making of rice through indigenous techniques. Being labour-intensive, this generates local employment, compared to mechanized processing that is employed by private rice mills, most of which are located outside Kuttanad.

## 7.5 Insights from the Case Study

This section discusses the key insights from this case study. Firstly, we will examine the possibilities and limits of ‘self-help’. Then, we will offer some pointers on NGO-State relations.

### 7.5.1 *Self-help: Prospects and Dilemma*

Experience has shown that SHGs are no panacea for poverty and exclusion. At the fundamental level, these groups are found not capable of challenging the existing power relations in the society (Jakimow and Kilby, 2006). At an operational level, it is debatable whether SHGs are able to reach and include the poorest (Thorp et al, 2005). As field research has demonstrated, even in the process of accessing financial resources legitimately due to them, SHG members sometimes find themselves locked into an unequal relationship with bureaucracy (Kalpana, 2008).

Such limitations notwithstanding, the material bases of development interventions cannot be ignored, as Bebbington and Bebbington (2001: 15) observe. Money (immediate liquidity) is highly relevant in poor people’s lives. Savings through SHGs, though marginal, are helpful, especially in times of urgency, as we found from in-depth household case studies from the fieldwork, discussed in Chapter 6. This could possibly explain why KNGO’s business model (training in occupational skills) was only moderately successful, whereas the savings model (micro-credit) sustained, even in the midst of setbacks. While the former aimed at building ‘capabilities’<sup>107</sup> and creating self-reliance in the long-term, the latter catered to the immediate day-to-day needs of the SHG members. The same observation holds while analyzing the decline of KNGO SHGs vis-à-vis the government NHGs; the latter could offer better financial services. On the other hand, the education loan scheme, though very popular at present, might hamper the financial stability of households in the long-term. It is a high risk investment in anticipation of future returns. Labour market opportunities and possibilities for migration might diminish leaving many households, particularly the less well-off, in a perilous state of not being able to repay the loans.

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<sup>107</sup> à la Amartya Sen (Sen, 2000: 87-110).

KNGO may be 'correct' in promoting a long-term, sustainable model. However, it has met with only limited success in making the local people understand this<sup>108</sup>. It faces constraints in addressing their short-term needs, as in the case of savings model SHGs vis-à-vis the business model SHGs or government NHGs. Also, KNGO is forced, to a certain extent, to reconcile 'sustainability' with 'populism' to retain its constituencies, through initiatives such as the education loan scheme.

### *7.5.2 NGOs and the State: Confronting or Complementing?*

Coming to the question that we posed at the outset: What insights does the case study offer as regards NGO-State relations? The limitations in making generalizations from a single case study notwithstanding, certain inferences could be drawn.

Lewis (2001: 150) notes that NGOs may adopt three strategies in relation to the State. Firstly, they may get into 'selective collaboration' with the government, limiting to specific sectors. Secondly, by working on issues that are not addressed by the government, NGOs may perform a 'gap-filling' role, maintaining a low profile. Finally, they may take an advocacy position acting as pressure groups and demonstrating 'alternatives' to the policies of the government. While the first two strategies represent different levels of closeness to the State, the third resonates the 'binary model' of NGO-State relations that we saw in the beginning of this chapter.

In practice, however, NGOs adopt a mix of these strategies depending on contexts and issues. Recent empirical research also illustrates this. Ramanath (2008), for instance, dispels doubts on 'isomorphism' in the structures and processes of NGOs by demonstrating that they use different tactics in response to the same public policy environment. Rejecting conventional dichotomies such as 'mainstream v/s alternative', Chhotray (2005) shows that NGOs can be both 'development agents' and 'political entrepreneurs' at the same time; doing development work along with the State on the one hand, and on the other, resisting the State by taking an activist mode. The fears that closer relations with the state can bring identity problems to NGOs (Lewis, 2001: 150) are rather misplaced as these studies show.

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<sup>108</sup> During several of our discussions, KNGO personnel lamented that the local people are concerned more about immediate (monetary) gains, than long-term benefits.

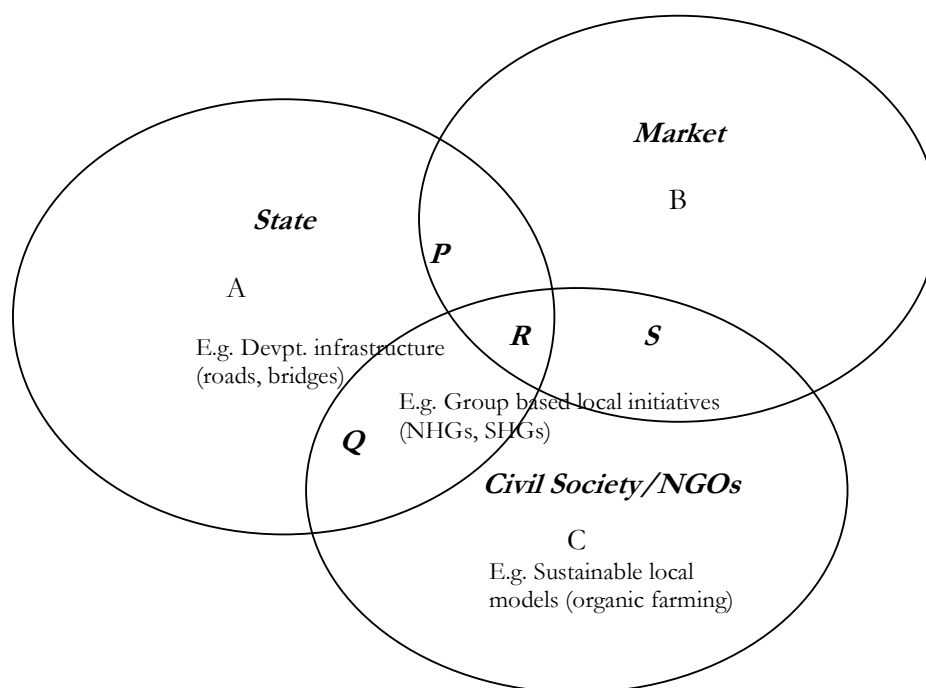
KNGO also exhibits such 'multiple identities' in its relations with the State. It collaborates with or complements the State on the one hand, and on the other, takes a confrontationist stance against the State. As we saw, in the process of formalizing the SHG movement as well as in its several programmes, KNGO engages with and manages a working relationship with government agencies and institutions such as NABARD. Though from an 'alternatives' perspective, such collaboration might lend NGOs vulnerable to criticisms about their ideology (Pieterse, 1998: 346), as Lewis (2001: 141) observes, NGOs need to prioritize strategies based on the opportunities and constraints if they are to be effective.

Compared to such 'selective collaboration', the case of issues-based SHGs may be viewed as 'gap-filling' (Lewis, 2001: 150). In this case, though KNGO initially resisted the State taking over its functions, it identified certain 'gaps' between the priorities of the local people (education, housing, water) and what the State offered and stepped in to fill this. On the one hand, this repositioning avoided conflict of interest between KNGO and the State. On the other, this 'product differentiation' (credit plus other services) made good sense for strategic management of service delivery by KNGO.

In contrast, KNGO's response in the wake of the paddy crisis takes an 'open confrontation' mode. Such a 'political' stance is closer to the alternatives based view on NGO-State relations. Even as it engages in activism, mobilizing farmers and resorting to street protests, against the ineffectiveness of the government, it promotes sustainable (organic farming) and locally relevant (traditional paddy processing) 'alternatives'. Though symbolic, this nevertheless brings politics and ideology back to the frame, positing local and indigenous systems against the predominantly urban orientation in development (Escobar, 1992).

NGO-State relations, thus, traverse beyond the simple dichotomous characterisations typical of the ‘binary model’<sup>109</sup>. The interplay is more complex (Figure I) with overlaps (portions Q and R) in the activities of NGOs and the State even as both actors have their own domains of influence (portions A and C). Mounting evidence on such blurred boundaries between NGOs/civil society, the State and the market has, of late, led to a rethink on the notion of ‘alternatives’ (Bebbington and Bebbington, 2001). Even as they may attempt in the long run to influence the wider process of systemic change, as KNGO does through its Swashraya vision, in the short run as development/policy actors, NGOs are involved in programmatic interventions at different levels. Against this backdrop, Mitlin et al (2007) argue that the efforts at re-conceptualizing ‘alternatives’ will benefit from seeing that NGOs may be involved in forging hegemony as also counter-hegemony and that their role in realizing alternatives has often been in conjunction with the programmes of developmentalist states.

*Figure 7.1 Conceptualizing NGO-State Relations*



*Source:* Extended upon van Rooy (2002:491)

<sup>109</sup> In international development, efforts at ‘eschewing false dichotomies’ such as State v/s market, and building more realistic, interlinked conceptualizations have been on since the late 1990s (World Bank, 1999, ‘World Development Report 2000/01: Approach and Outline’. Available at <http://siteresources.worldbank.org/INTPOVERTY/Resources/WDR/approult.pdf> , accessed on 08.10.2008).

## 7.6 Concluding Comments

Summing up, the descriptive narrative in the chapter shows a contrast between the approaches and the responses of the State and KNGO to the regional development of Kuttanad. We saw that while the State takes a largely 'growth' centric approach, KNGO is guided by a local-oriented, 'sustainability' model. Analytically, this chapter has placed forth two main observations:

Firstly, NGO-State relations are more complex than usually conceptualized. We illustrated that NGOs exhibit 'multiple identities' in the process of engagement with the State – selective collaboration, gap-filling and posing alternatives (Lewis, 2001: 150). As such, the relationship need not be confrontationist as often posited. This observation sits well with several other recent case studies (e.g. Véron, 2001, Chhotray, 2005, Ramanath, 2008) as also the call to revisit the notion of 'alternatives' as applied to NGOs (Mitlin et al, 2007).

Secondly, specific NGO interventions and NGO-State relations need to be understood in context. NGOs/civil society have historically fought against oppressive regimes in their role as agents of democratization and 'watchdog' vis-à-vis the State (Mercer, 2002). Under stable political conditions, NGOs have generally collaborated with governments, performing a development role (Sen, 1999, Kudva, 2005). As we saw, specific interventions of NGOs as well as their positioning vis-à-vis the State are the products of 'local' socio-politics, NGOs' relations with their constituencies/clientele and their own organizational strategies. The challenge for public policy is to understand the limitations as well as the possibilities of NGOs and the State in different development contexts, build synergies and effect co-ordinated responses.





## **CONCLUSION**



## VIII

### CONCLUSION

#### 8.1 Reflecting Back

This chapter concludes the study. We do not intend to elaborate on the implications, conceptual and/or policy, of the results, since each of the three empirical chapters in Part II has dealt with these already. Instead, we aim briefly to both reflect back on the study as well as to think forward beyond it. Reflecting back, we point out the key contributions of the study and provide a conceptual summary. Thinking forward, we will look into the major limitations and offer directions for further research.

##### *8.1.1 Contributions of the Study*

This PhD study was conceived at a time when Development Studies and its core concern, viz., poverty research, had entered a ‘period of introspection’ (Sumner, 2006: 644), as regards both theory and practice. As far as theory is concerned, the conceptual shift from monetary poverty to multidimensional poverty has brought forth the need to combine disciplines and mix methods (Hulme and Toye, 2006). As for policies and action on poverty, Development Studies is characterized by a ‘concern for praxis’ (Court and Maxwell, 2005: 714), pointing to the need to bridge the research-policy gap that allegedly exists. We have tried to address both these concerns in this study.

As regards theory, we sought answer to the fundamental conceptual question, ‘what is poverty?’. Going further, we examined the multiple dimensions of poverty and also what poverty means to the different actors involved. To this end, we have drawn conceptual elements from across different disciplines (e.g. economics, sociology) in the true cross-disciplinary spirit that is characteristic of the ‘new’ Development Studies. We have also tried to apply state-of-the-art methodological approaches in development research (‘participatory numbers’, ‘qual-quant’).

As regards policy, we point out firstly, that setting global standards often comes at the cost of local specificities, given the diversity of the poor and their living worlds (Chambers, 1995). Just as we rightly focus on achieving the global development targets, such as the MDGs, we also need to look at a local level, consulting the lay people, whether their priorities are met. As we have suggested, local views can be effectively

incorporated in policies and acted upon given the existence of strong decentralized governments that function in close collaboration with researchers and NGOs.

Secondly, we emphasize the synergies that arise out of co-ordinated responses from the various policy actors. Even while arguing that NGOs cannot substitute the pivotal ‘developmental’ role of the State, we accord a prime role to private initiatives in poverty reduction. We suggest that while the State acts as a provider/facilitator, private institutions (NGOs, voluntary initiatives, charity) play the role of a buffer.

### *8.1.2 Poverty Knowledge and Development Actors: A Conceptual Summary*

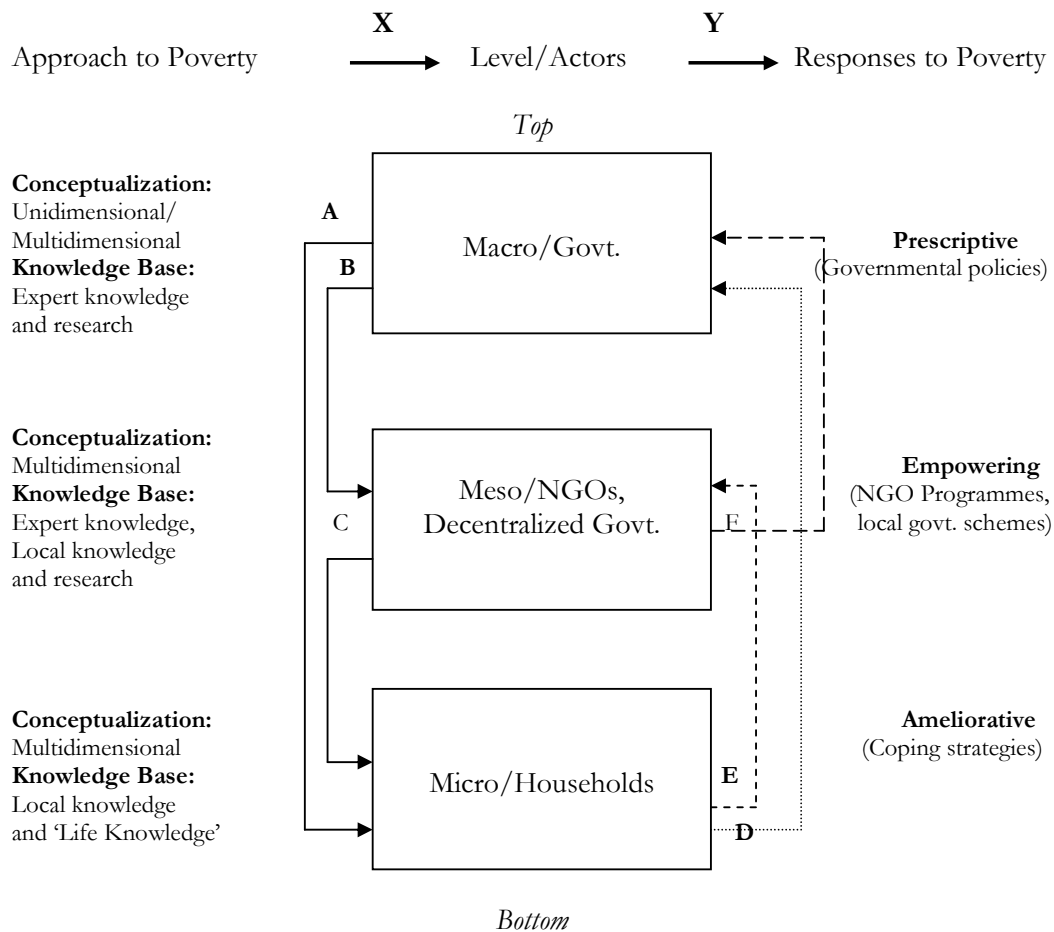
Figure 8.1 attempts to provide a conceptual summary of the study. The illustration brings together the research objectives, which we set forth in Chapter 1 (sections 1.2 and 1.3), and the conceptual themes, which we discussed in Chapter 3, interpreted in terms of the empirical results presented in Part II (Chapters 5, 6 and 7).

Responses of development actors to poverty depend on their understanding of it (arrows X and Y in the figure). As we saw in Chapter 5, the government (macro level actor) views poverty in unidimensional (income/consumption approach) as well as multidimensional (capability approach) terms. This understanding of poverty stems from expert knowledge and research. Governmental response comes as policies. However, positioned at the ‘top’, the responses seem largely ‘prescriptive’ in nature.

NGOs and local (decentralized) governments, positioned in the ‘middle’, are the meso level actors. As we noted in Chapters 5 and 7, they generally view poverty as multidimensional (participatory/alternative approach). In addition to expert knowledge and research, being close to and, in many instances, part of the ‘bottom’, local knowledge also play a key role in shaping their understanding of poverty. The responses of meso level actors, manifested in NGO programmes and local government schemes are, to a certain extent, ‘empowering’ in nature.

At the ‘bottom’, positioned at the receiving end of policies, programmes and schemes, are the households (micro level actors). As we saw in Chapter 5, the lay people and the poor generally view poverty as multidimensional. The lived experiences as constituted in ‘life knowledge’ shape the households’ understanding of poverty, in addition to local knowledge. Households fall into, live with or escape from poverty. Their response viz., coping strategies (Chapter 6), being poverty avoidance mechanisms, are largely ‘ameliorative’ in nature.

Figure 8.1 Poverty Knowledge and Development Actors: A Conceptual Summary



The three linkages of 'top with bottom', viz., government with the lay people/poor, government with the NGOs/local government and the NGOs/local government with the lay people/poor, denoted by arrows A, B and C could be seen as 'strong linkages'. Of the three linkages of 'bottom with top', arrow D, representing the linkage of the lay people/poor with the government, is the weakest. Arrow E represents a rather strong linkage of the lay people/poor with NGOs/local (decentralized) government. The linkage of NGOs with the government, arrow F, is stronger.

## 8.2 Thinking Forward

In looking beyond this dissertation, three major issues come to the fore.

The first issue is with regard to participation, the theoretical core of this study. We took a participatory approach, celebrating diversity of knowledge, at a philosophical plane, and putting people's priorities atop, at a more applied level. While we have forcefully argued for participation in development and applied it, to a certain extent, on the field, our use and analysis of participation has primarily been 'technical', confined within the contours of participation as a methodological 'toolkit'. As such, we have largely ignored the politics of participation and the power relations (Williams, 2004, Leal, 2007). Though we have tried to show that social capital based participatory initiatives such as self-help groups may exclude the very poor, by shifting the research focus to empowerment of the poor, the core objective of participation, this point could be extended further.

The second issue relates to multidimensional poverty, comparability across contexts and policy. While multidimensional poverty is definitely a conceptual improvement over conventional monetary poverty, its operationalisation across contexts has been limited at present to the human development index, which centres on just three dimensions, viz., income, longevity and education. A key limitation of this index is that it does not account for the dimensions that the people value, which has been the focus of this study. Incorporating people's dimensions, however, constraints comparability across contexts and has limited policy applicability at the macro-level. How to break this trade-off is a research issue for the future. Although still in a nascent stage, such efforts are already underway. The research on 'missing dimensions' that began recently at the Oxford Human Development and Poverty Initiative (Alkire, 2007) is an example.

The third and final issue concerns the future of poverty research methods. As we have seen, the methodological debate on poverty has traversed from conflict to consensus. What does this hold for the future? Where do we move from here? If current research is any indication, participation is here to stay, on account of its ethical superiority as also methodological flexibility. We noted that participatory methods are now accepted as a third way in development research, in addition to the traditional qualitative and quantitative research methods. In future, we could even see national level poverty estimates prepared through participatory methods (Chambers, 2007b). The Malawi experience (Barahona and Levy, 2007), where statistical principles (like probability sampling) were combined with participatory methods (like PRA) to produce national statistics, may be a first step.







## SUMMARY

### *Title of the Dissertation*

‘Poverty knowledge and development actors – a case study of the approach and the responses of the government, an NGO and the local people from Kerala, India’.

### *Background and Objective*

Responses to poverty depend on the knowledge of it. However, the ethical fervour apart, a number conceptual and methodological issues stand in the way of knowing poverty, some of which this study deals with. Our basic objective is to examine the understandings of development actors on poverty and their responses to it. In particular, we ask the questions: How do actors who make the policies (the government, NGOs) and actors who are affected by the policies (lay people, the poor) view poverty? What are the similarities/differences and the implications? How do these actors respond to poverty? We take three actors, viz., the government, a non-governmental organisation and the lay people that operate, although not exclusively, at three different levels.

### *Concepts, Context and Methods*

We advance participatory approach as the theoretical crux of the study. Our view is that the participatory approach represents an alternate way of looking at poverty, though not necessarily better or worse than the popular monetary approach. However, a key normative element is that participatory approach results in a shift of power from the experts, who have seldom lived through poverty, to the lay people, many of whom themselves experience or have experienced it and hence in a better position to explain what poverty means. The experts act as facilitators, with the lay people identifying their problems and, in many cases, analyzing them, resulting ultimately in their empowerment.

‘Poverty Knowledge’ in the title suggests the basis of creation of knowledge on poverty. Drawing on the two distinct philosophical traditions in social sciences viz., positivist and non-positivist, and extant literature, we show that participatory approach implies diversity of knowledge (relativist ontology and subjectivist epistemology), several ways of knowing (methodological pluralism) and primacy of actors within the structures suggesting a non-positivist, not necessarily anti-positivist, overtone. As regards methodology we take objection to distinguishing monetary approach as quantitative and participatory approach as qualitative and show that participatory approach can also generate ‘numbers’ (‘participatory numbers’).

The empirical material used in this study emerges from field research conducted in Kuttanad region of Kerala state in India primarily during 2004-05. The 'Development Actors' in our Kerala case include the national (Government of India) and state (Government of Kerala) governments, a regional NGO and the local people in a village (Kainakari) in Kuttanad.

### *Summary of the Chapters and Key Findings*

This dissertation has six chapters organized into two parts, in addition to introduction (Chapter 1) and conclusion (Chapter 8). Part I locates the research within the current conceptual and methodological debate on poverty. It comprises of two chapters (2 and 3).

*Chapter 2* provides a selective review of the methodological debate on poverty. We note that compared with the divisive views of the past, integrative thinking has recently come to characterise poverty research methods. *Chapter 3* introduces the conceptual and methodological themes underlying this study and sets the context from which to approach the empirical chapters.

Part II presents the specific results of field research in Kuttanad. It comprises of four chapters (4, 5, 6 and 7).

*Chapter 4* provides acquaintance with the research setting (Kuttanad) and describes the fieldwork. Originally written as three separate empirical case studies/articles, chapters 5 (part B), 6 and 7, each have its own review and methodology enabling readers to go through them fairly independently.

*Chapter 5* is the core of the study. Part A of the chapter reviews briefly the approach and the responses of the Government of India (GoI) and the Government of Kerala (GoK) to poverty. Part B compares and contrasts the view on poverty of the lay people with that of the policymakers, taking the real-life issue of identification of the Below Poverty Line (BPL) households. Drawing from fieldwork and applying the 'participatory numbers' approach, we devise a 'local method' to identify poor households, based on the villagers' poverty criteria. The local method is then compared with the official methods used by GoI and GoK. Based on the results, we argue for the need to take into account local dimensions of poverty, in addition to objective/universal dimensions, in the design of poverty reduction programmes. Our findings also suggest that effective risk mitigation strategies must be devised to help poor households cope with shocks and stresses as well as prevent the vulnerable non-poor from falling into poverty.

*Chapter 6* examines household responses to shocks and stresses and points out when, how and to what extent do household resources (economic, human and social capital) and institutional intervention (government and NGO) help households cope. In the backdrop of the popularisation of social capital, it has become fashionable in development circles to highlight the resilience of the poor in the midst of stresses and shocks as well as their resourcefulness. Expressing scepticism, we argue that social capital is a ‘conditional’ resource for the poor, availability of which is dependant on the presence of a ‘critical mass’ of other resources. The State plays a pivotal role in creating this ‘critical mass’. Household level case studies from fieldwork, on how the poor cope with vulnerable situations, are used to illustrate this point.

*Chapter 7* provides a contrasting narrative of the approach and the responses of a local NGO and the State to development/poverty in Kuttanad. We find that while the State takes a largely ‘growth’ centric approach to regional development, the NGO in the case study is guided by a local-oriented, ‘sustainability’ model. The key analytical contribution of the chapter, however, lies in explaining the dynamics of NGO-State relations. We argue that NGOs exhibit multiple identities – selective collaboration, gap-filling and posing alternatives – in the process of engagement with the State. Reading this alongside recent empirical evidence, we suggest that the relationship between the two needs to be conceptualized as more complex, and not confrontationist as often posited. Such conceptualization will help understand the limitations as also the possibilities of NGOs and the State in different development contexts, which in turn can inform policies.

*Keywords*

Development Studies, Knowledge, Methods, Participatory Numbers, Multidimensional Poverty, Vulnerability, Coping, Social Capital, NGOs, India, Kerala, Kuttanad.



## NEDERLANDSE SAMENVATTING<sup>110</sup>

### *Titel van de Dissertatie*

‘Kennis over armoede en ontwikkelings actoren – een case studie van de benadering en respons van de regering, een NGO en de lokale bevolking van Kerala, India’.

### *Achtergrond en Doelstelling*

Armoedebeleid hangt af van de kennis erover. Er zijn echter – naast de ethische kant – een aantal conceptuele en methodologische zaken die de kennis over armoede belemmeren. Over een aantal van deze belemmeringen gaat dit proefschrift. Het doel is het onderzoeken van de kennis van ontwikkelings actoren over armoede en hun reacties op armoede. We richten ons specifiek op de volgende vragen: Hoe kijken verschillende actoren naar armoede? Hierbij onderzoeken we zowel het perspectief van beleidsmakers (de regering, NGO's) als dat van actoren die door het beleid worden beïnvloed (de leek, de armen). Wat zijn de overeenkomsten/verschillen en de implicaties? Hoe reageren deze actoren op armoede? We kijken naar drie actoren die op drie niveaus opereren: de regering, een niet-governementele organisatie (NGO) en de leek.

### *Concepten, Context, en Methoden*

De theoretische invalshoek van deze studie is de participerende benadering. Deze benadering biedt een alternatieve manier om te kijken naar armoede, hoewel die niet noodzakelijk beter of slechter is dan de gebruikelijke monetaire benadering. De participerende benadering vormt echter een beter uitgangspunt om te aan te geven wat armoede betekent, omdat het een machtsbreuk oplevert tussen de expert – die zelf zelden in armoede heeft geleefd – en de leek – die wel vaak zelf in armoede leeft of heeft geleefd. De experts kunnen de situatie van armen vergemakkelijken, waarbij de leken hun problemen voorleggen en ze analyseren, wat uiteindelijk ‘empowerment’ tot gevolg heeft.

‘Poverty Knowledge’ in de titel refereert naar de basis van het creëren van kennis over armoede. We steunen op de twee verschillende filosofische tradities in de sociale wetenschappen – te weten de positivistische en niet-positivistische –, alsook op de bestaande literatuur. Daarmee laten we zien dat een participerende benadering een diversiteit aan kennis impliceert (relativistische ontologie en subjectivistische epistemologie); verschillende manieren van weten (methodologisch pluralisme); en nadruk op actoren binnen structuren met een niet-positivistische, maar niet noodzakelijk

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<sup>110</sup> A translation in Dutch by Maike van Damme, of the summary of the thesis is presented here. The time and effort provided for the work is greatly acknowledged.

anti-positivistische, ondertoon. Wat de methodologie betreft, maken we bezwaar tegen het onderscheid tussen de monetaire benadering als kwantitatief en de participerende benadering als zijnde kwalitatief. Verder laten we zien dat de participerende benadering ook ‘aantallen’ kan genereren (‘participatory numbers’).

Het empirisch materiaal dat we in deze studie gebruiken komt uit veldonderzoek gedaan in de Kuttanad regio van Kerala, een provincie in India, gedurende 2004-05. De ‘Development Actors’ in de Kerala case zijn de nationale (de regering van India) en de provinciale (regering van Kerala) regeringen, een regionale NGO en de lokale bevolking in een dorp (Kainakari) in Kuttanad.

### *Samenvatting van de Hoofdstukken en Bevindingen*

Naast de Introductie (Hoofdstuk 1) en de Conclusie (Hoofdstuk 8) heeft dit proefschrift zes hoofdstukken die in twee delen zijn geordend. Deel I bestaat uit twee hoofdstukken (2 en 3) en plaatst het onderzoek binnen het huidige conceptuele en methodologische debat over armoede.

*Hoofdstuk 2* geeft een selectief overzicht van het methodologische debat over armoede. We wijzen erop dat tegenwoordig – i.t.t. het beeld van vroeger – integratief denken overheerst in armoede onderzoeksmethoden. *Hoofdstuk 3* introduceert de conceptuele en methodologische thema’s van deze studie en beschrijft het theoretisch kader van de empirische hoofdstukken.

Deel II bestaat uit vier hoofdstukken (4, 5, 6, en 7) die gaan over de resultaten van het veldonderzoek in Kuttanad.

*Hoofdstuk 4* behandelt de onderzoekssetting (Kuttanad) en beschrijft het veldwerk. Hoofdstuk 5, 6 en 7 zijn oorspronkelijk geschreven als drie aparte empirische case studies/artikelen en hebben elk hun eigen review en methodologie. Dit maakt dat ze elk onafhankelijk van elkaar gelezen kunnen worden.

*Hoofdstuk 5* is de kern van dit proefschrift. Deel A van het hoofdstuk biedt een kort overzicht van de benadering en de respons op armoede van de Regering van India (GoI) en de Regering van Kerala (GoK). Deel B vergelijkt en contrasteert het beeld van armoede van de lokale bevolking met dat van de beleidsmakers, waarbij het vraagstuk van ‘Below Poverty Line’ (BPL) huishoudens aan bod komt. Op basis van het veldwerk en de ‘participatory numbers’ benadering, ontwikkelen we een ‘lokale methode’ om arme huishoudens te kunnen identificeren, gebaseerd op armoedecriteria die door de dorpelingen zelf zijn aangedragen. Deze lokale methode wordt vervolgens vergeleken met de officiële methoden die door de GoI en GoK worden gebruikt. De resultaten wijzen uit dat bij het opstellen van armoedebestrijdingsprogramma’s ook lokale

dimensies van armoede meegewogen moeten worden (naast objectieve/universele dimensies). Onze bevindingen geven ook aan dat effectieve risico verminderingsstrategieën ontwikkeld moeten worden om arme huishoudens te helpen omgaan met shocks en stress, alsook te voorkomen dat kwetsbare niet-armen in armoede vervallen.

*Hoofdstuk 6* onderzoekt de reacties van huishoudens op shocks en stress en geeft aan wanneer, hoe, en in welke mate hulpbronnen van huishoudens (economisch, menselijk en sociaal kapitaal) en institutionele interventie (regering en NGO) huishoudens helpen om met armoede om te gaan. In ontwikkelingsstudies is het modieus – met het populaire sociaal kapitaal debat op de achtergrond – om te wijzen op de veerkracht van de armen alsook op de kracht van hun hulpbronnen. Met enige scepsis beargumenteren we dat sociaal kapitaal een ‘conditionele’ hulpbron is voor de armen. De beschikking over deze hulpbron is afhankelijk van de aanwezigheid van een ‘critical mass’ van andere hulpbronnen. De Provincie speelt een centrale rol in het creëren van deze ‘critical mass’. We illustreren dit punt met veldstudies over hoe de armen met kwetsbare situaties omgaan (op het niveau van huishoudens).

*Hoofdstuk 7* geeft een contrasterend verhaal van de benadering en de respons van een lokale NGO en de Provincie op armoede en ontwikkeling in Kuttanad. We vinden dat de Provincie vooral een ‘groei’ benadering t.o.v. een regionale ontwikkeling hanteert, terwijl de NGO in de case studie wordt geleid door een lokaal-georiënteerd, ‘sustainability’ model. De belangrijkste analytische benadering van dit hoofdstuk ligt echter in het verklaren van de dynamiek van NGO-Provincie relaties. We beargumenteren dat NGOs multiple identiteiten hebben – selectieve collaboratie, gaten-vullen en alternatieven aandragen – in de omgang met de Provincie. Dit samengenomen met recent empirisch bewijs, leidt er volgens ons toe dat de relatie tussen NGO en Provincie geconceptualiseerd dient te worden als complexer, en niet alleen confronterend, zoals al zovaak is gedaan. Een dergelijke conceptualisering helpt om de belemmeringen, maar ook de mogelijkheden te begrijpen van NGO’s en de Provincie in verschillende ontwikkelingscontexten, die op hun beurt beleid kunnen informeren.

### *Trefwoorden*

Ontwikkelingsstudies, Kennis, Methoden, ‘Participatory Numbers’, Multidimensionele Armoede, Kwetsbaarheid, ‘Coping’, Sociaal Kapitaal, NGOs, India, Kerala, Kuttanad.





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